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POSITIONING KAZAKHSTAN AS AN EMERGING MIDDLE POWER IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract. With the rise of the non-Western world, the topic of middle powers has been of increasing interest. The article analyzes Kazakhstan's significance as a middle power in the Central Asian region. In this regard, the analysis has provided the criteria assessment of middle power status to Kazakhstan, while attributing this to active participation in international dynamics that were targeted to strengthen the state's position. We examine whether Kazakhstan can be classified as such, using the hierarchical, functional, behavioral perspectives. While questions remain about its viability, this study concludes that Kazakhstan does indeed play the role of middle power in its region. Through its engagement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union it has been able to significantly advance regional security and ensure economic stability.

Key words: middle power, multilateral engagement, economic stability, regional leadership, diplomatic engagement, economic cooperation, international initiatives.

Аңдатпа. Батыстық емес әлемге қызығушылықтың артуымен орта державалар тақырыбы өзекті бола түсуде. Бұл мақалада Қазақстанның аймақтағы орта держава ретіндегі маңыздылығы талданады. Осыған байланысты талдау Қазақстанның мемлекеттің ұстанымын нығайтуға бағытталған халықаралық динамикаға белсенді қатысуын ескере отырып, критерийлерді ұсыну арқылы орта держава мәртебесін бағалауды қамтамасыз етті. Біз Қазақстанды иерархиялық, функционалдық және мінез-құлық тәсілдер арқылы осындай державаға жатқызуға болатынын қарастырамыз. Бұл рөлдегі оның әлеуеті туралы сұрақтардың толастамауына қарамастан, зерттеу Қазақстан өз аймағындағы орташа держава ретінде пайда болады деген қорытындыға келеді. Шанхай ынтымақтастық ұйымы мен Еуразиялық экономикалық одаққа қатысудың арқасында аймақтық қауіпсіздікті айтарлықтай нығайтып, экономикалық тұрақтылықты қамтамасыз ете алды.

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Түйінді сөздер: орта держава, көпжақты өзара іс-қимыл, экономикалық тұрақтылық, аймақтық көшбасшылық, дипломатиялық өзара іс-қимыл, экономикалық ынтымақтастық, халықаралық бастамалар..

Аннотация. С ростом интереса к не западному миру тема средних держав становится все более актуальной. В данной статье анализируется значение Казахстана как средней державы в регионе. В этой связи анализ предоставил оценку статуса средней державы через предоставление критериев для Казахстана, учитывая при этом активное участие страны в международной динамике, которая направлена на укрепление позиции государства. Мы рассматриваем, можно ли отнести Казахстан к таким державам, используя иерархический, функциональный и поведенческий подходы. Несмотря на сохраняющиеся вопросы о его потенциальности в этой роли, исследование приходит к выводу, что Казахстан действительно выступает в роли средней державы в своем регионе. Благодаря участию в Шанхайской организации сотрудничества и Евразийском экономическом союзе, ему удалось существенно укрепить региональную безопасность и обеспечить экономическую стабильность.

Ключевые слова: средняя сила, многостороннее взаимодействие, экономическая стабильность, региональное лидерство, дипломатическое взаимодействие, экономическое сотрудничество, международные инициативы.

Introduction

Interest in middle powers has surged with the interstate system trending towards multipolarity [1]. Despite its relatively recent independence, Kazakhstan presents an appealing case study, considering its active role in the international arena and global issues, including the war against terrorism [2]. Its peaceful transition to nationhood, commitment to nuclear disarmament, and adherence to a multi-faceted and multi-vector foreign policy have raised its standing on the global stage. These factors appeared as significant trends in the Kazakh foreign policy and relations soon after its independence [3, 4, 5]. The dedication Astana has shown in upholding regional stability, along with its geopolitical position and natural resources give credence to its potential for middle power status. Hence, the purpose of this study is to determine whether Kazakhstan can be considered a middle power by looking at its diplomatic activities, economic diversification strategies, and security initiatives.

Thanks to the particular geopolitical position and strategically important location of the country in Central Asia, which is likely be transformed into strengths and promising opportunities, Kazakhstan is a full-fledged actor in the international relations. In this context, it is necessary to review Kazakhstan as being the largest landlocked country, that is predominantly served as a significant bridge, connecting East and West. As might be pointed out, Kazakhstan is likely to be identified as a rapidly developing middle power and regional leader in Central Asia. Taking into

consideration national interests, it can be observed that the Republic of Kazakhstan has pursued multi-vector policy, which is oriented at the increased promotion of international peace and security, as well as balance and stability.

Kazakhstan, which is ranking 9th in terms of land area, possesses a profound historical narrative that underscores the state's significance within the Central Asian region. Historically, the territory, which is now recognized as Kazakhstan, served as a bridge for different civilizations and trade routes, fostering a fruitful environment of cultural diversity and economic importance [5]. Further, throughout the 20th century, Kazakhstan was identified as an integral part of the Soviet Union, developing as one of its pivotal countries. It should be mentioned that the region assumed an essential role in the Soviet space program, with the Baikonur Cosmodrome serving as the principal launch site [6]. Subsequent to the collapse and quick dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Kazakhstan transitioned into an independent and sovereign nation under the leadership of the former President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

The growing importance of the topic lies in surging interest in middle power status, Kazakhstan's geopolitical position with natural resources and proactive foreign policy, which establish state as a pivotal player in both regional and global contexts. In this regard, it is acceptable to analyze the state's role and activity as an emerging middle power in Central Asia, as well as to determine its contribution to the process of cooperation and interconnectedness of Central Asian

states. In accordance with this purpose, via investigating Kazakhstan's diplomatic activities, economic diversification strategies, and security initiatives as defined objectives, the crucial insights on the Kazakhstan's development as a middle power in Central Asia are likely to be offered. Moreover, Kazakhstan's peaceful transition to nationhood, commitment to nuclear disarmament, and adherence to a multi-faceted and multi-vector foreign policy have enriched its standing on the global stage. Kazakhstan's dedication to upholding regional stability, proactive involvement in conflict resolution endeavors, and hosting of prominent international gatherings have augmented its stature as a pivotal actor in the realm of Central Asian geopolitics.

Theoretical approaches to define state as a middle power

A middle power might be evaluated as a state that has significant influence on the interstate system, though not to the extent of the great powers. In this regard, middle powers contribute substantively to both regional and global stability and balance, which might be characterized by active engagement in international affairs, peace-building diplomacy, and economic development [6]. As for Kazakhstan, the pursuit of middle power status has constituted a deliberate foreign policy objective, to fulfill its desire to extend its influence beyond its borders.

Unfortunately, the field of IR still wrestles with how to define middle power. No objective definition exists [7]. As often occurs in areas of ambiguity, different schools of thought have emerged to provide some regularity to the study of the concept. Most theoretical approaches fall into the behavioral, hierarchical, and functional perspectives. The behavioral perspective deems a state a middle power if it perceives itself to be one and acts accordingly [8]. From the behavioral perspective, then, if the Republic of Kazakhstan is perceived as an emerging middle power in the Central Asian region it holds that status. Some have criticized this perspective as engaging in circular reasoning—a middle power is a state that has the characteristics of a middle power

[9]. However, that overlooks the degree to which perception determines reality in international relations. If a state can convince key actors it is a middle power then it is one. In fact, it has been posited that scholars and officials began pushing the concept of the middle power into the discourse precisely to that effect. That most of the work on the subject has been done by scholars from such states cannot be a coincidence [9], though that does not invalidate the concept *a priori*. However, that does preclude the formation of an objective definition for middle power on that basis.

The hierarchical perspective attempts to resolve that issue by considering the capabilities, self-positioning and recognized status of the state. Thus, middle states logically stand in the middle of the hierarchy [8]. Bolton and Nash [10] favor a simple version of the hierarchical perspective, characterizing middle powers “as relatively wealthy, small to medium-sized states, with no nuclear weapons and no permanent seat on the UN Security Council.”

Unsurprisingly, Organski [11], the father of power transition theory, a variant of hegemonic stability theory, favored the hierarchical perspective.

Yet, the hierarchical perspective itself retains some subjectivity. Which indicator(s) of power should be used to determine the ranking of the world powers? Lacking a clear answer, the ranking depends on the scholar [12]. As its purported objectivity is the primary strength of the hierarchical objective, others prefer the functional perspective, which defines a middle power as a state that exerts influence in certain areas of interest, and fulfills a special role in the international arena [7]. It is arguably less objective than the hierarchical perspective, but a purely raw examination of state capacity overlooks states that punch above their weight in the interstate system by engaging in global responsibilities, multilateralism, and conflict resolution [12]. In other words, the hierarchical perspective cannot capture a state's limitations for a specific environment and thus its expressed power. The opposite is true of the functional perspective, which intuitively captures the latter while

eschewing attempts to measure its raw power.

So, it is reasonable to consider the status of middle powers in a similar fashion to that of threat. The familiar equation is Threat = Capabilities x Intent. Here, threat could be more broadly thought of as expressed power or influence and capabilities of course as a combination of population growth, military forces and level of security, and economic development [13]. By including intention, capabilities, and threat or influence, variables associated with the behavioral, hierarchical and functional perspectives, respectively, this approach offers a blend of the three main schools of thought. In that vein, Kazakhstani academics have argued for the status of Kazakhstan as an emerging and developing middle power, comprehensively analyzing the country's prospects in relation to other major countries [14]. They concluded that Kazakhstan's future status as a middle power will depend on its active commitment to strengthening and advancing science, economic readiness for the challenges of our time, and the political will of the country's leadership and the geopolitical situation [14].

The methodological basis

This study incorporates both quantitative and qualitative methods to determine whether Kazakhstan is a middle power from all three perspectives. We first looked at data from credible sources, including Global Peace Index, World Bank, IMF, Global Firepower Index, SIPRI, and Political Risk Index (described below) to assess Kazakhstan's middle power status from the hierarchical perspective.

1. The Global Peace Index substantially measures the level of peace and security in countries based on such quantitative factors as crime rates, political stability index, and the size of the country's military expenditures annually.

2. The World Bank Rating aims to provide data on indicators of a country's economic development, including indicators of economic output and diversification of economic development.

3. The Global Firepower Index mainly assesses the military strength of a country

based on quantitative factors such as the number of active military equipment, human resources in the active army, the diversity of military equipment, munitions, and technological innovations.

4. The Political Risk Index: assesses the risk associated with investing in a country based on political stability, sustainability of leadership, and governance.

In comparative terms, the behavioral perspective focuses on how states formulate their foreign policy behavior, as well as how states perceive themselves and are perceived by other countries and actors in the international community. In this case, both quantitative and qualitative analyses are applied, since Google Trends data demonstrate the number of queries in the search engine. In addition, we looked at qualitative data, including public interest in the topic of middle power diplomacy, as well as evaluating perceptions regarding the country's compliance with the given status. To follow its diplomatic evolution, we used the case-study method, examining specific instances of Kazakhstan mediating international conflicts.

Last, but not least, the functional approach highlights the weight a middle power's actions carries, which we evaluated by examining its participation in international conflicts as a mediator for maintaining stability and security. This involved performing a qualitative analysis of political reports, speeches of leaders, in which the diplomatic commitments of Kazakhstan and its influence at both the regional and international levels are described and documented.

The integration of diverse viewpoints yields a comprehensive understanding of Kazakhstan and its influence on regional and global dynamics, which will demonstrate whether it is a middle power, and if not, whether it has the potential to be, and under what conditions.

Criteria assessment of Kazakhstan's middle power status

Our evaluation of Kazakhstan's status in Central Asia from the hierarchical perspective focused on its economic diversification, the country's foreign policy behavior through diplomatic engagement,

level of spending on security and defense, and commitment to peace-building (Table 1).

Table 1. Evaluation of Kazakhstan's middle power status across key criteria

Criteria for Middle Power Status	Source	Relevance to Kazakhstan
Diplomatic Engagement	Global Peace Index, United Nations	It should be mentioned that Kazakhstan ranked 76th in the Global Peace Index (GPI) out of 163 countries, climbing 21 places, according to the June 2023 report published by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) [15]. Kazakhstan actively participates in global organizations such as the United Nations, hosting key diplomatic events such as the Astana Process on Syria. Moreover, the state has diplomatic connections with various nations and engages in peacekeeping efforts.
Economic Diversification	World Bank, IMF	As regards to IMF World Economic Outlook 2023, Kazakhstan's annual real GDP growth is 4.2% [16]. Kazakhstan's economy has diversified beyond natural resources, growing its technology, manufacturing, and services sectors.
Security and Defense	Global Firepower Index 2024	Referring to the Global Firepower, Kazakhstan is holding 58 places out of 145 countries out [17]. Furthermore, according to Global Firepower, Kazakhstan is likely to be identified as the second big military power in the Collective Security Treaty Organization after Russia. Kazakhstan plays a pivotal role in Central Asian geopolitics, mediating regional conflicts and promoting stability. Moreover, in order to ensure peacekeeping initiatives, Kazakhstan is strengthening security and defense in country, as well as in the region, by increasing its military strength.
Commitment to Peace-Building	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)	According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in 2022, Kazakhstan's military budget is \$1.1 billion [18]. Kazakhstan is committed to peace-building, hosting peace talks such as Astana Peace Talks concerning Syrian conflict and contributing to various UN peacekeeping missions.

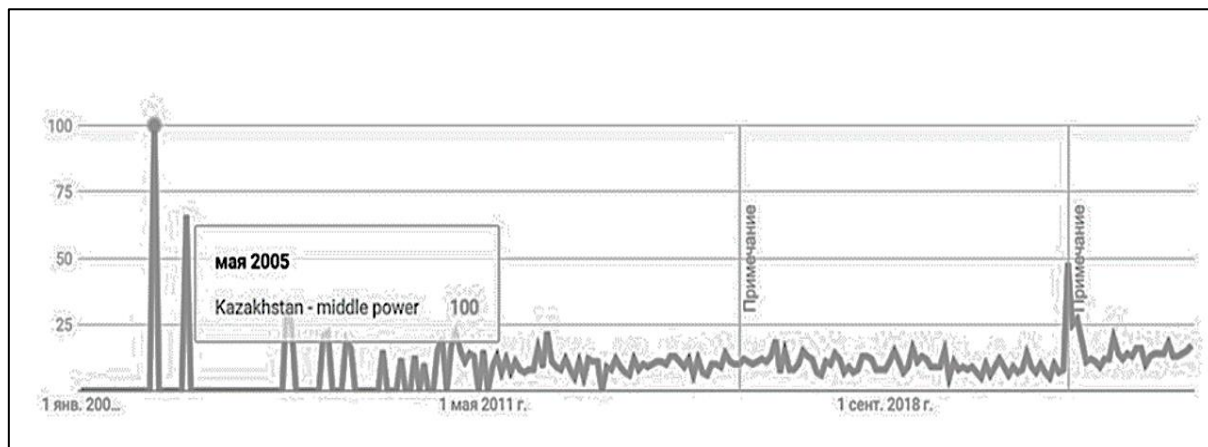
Source: compiled by authors

In addition to the above more objective criteria, we looked to at Kazakhstan from the behavioral perspective to determine whether Kazakhstan views itself as a middle power. To assess this, we looked at the interest in the topic among Internet users. In searching queries for the words “Kazakhstan is a middle power”, we found it characterized most by the following expressions: “emerging middle power” and

“middle power as a bridge between East and West”.

Referring to the Google Trends statistics [19], the first peak in the interest of this topic occurred in May 2005. Moreover, the search tendencies give support to Kazakhstan's status as an emerging middle power.

Picture 1. Dynamics of search query “Kazakhstan is a middle power” in the world from 2004 to the present (based on Google Trends materials)

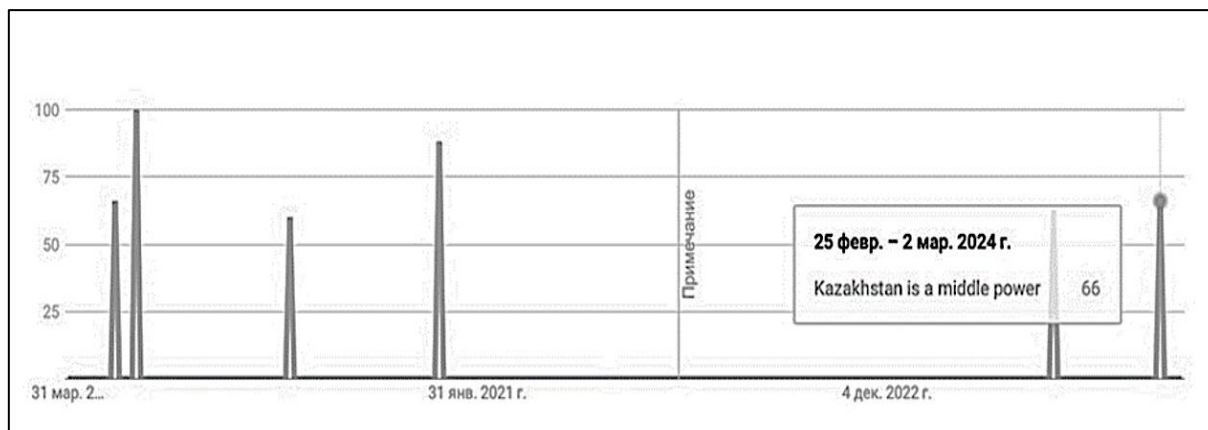


Source: Official site of Google Trends [19]

According to the statistics given below, in the past five years, interest in the topic increased from May 31, 2020 to January 31, 2021. More recently, over the period from February 25 to March 2, 2024, the

popularity of queries was 66 out of 100, which is an above-average popularity indicator [19].

Picture 2. Statistics for the query “Kazakhstan is a middle power” in the world from 2019 to 2024, over the last 5 years (based on Google Trends statistics)



Source: Official site of Google Trends [19]

Kazakhstan must provide leadership in multiple domains to demonstrate middle power status. First and foremost, it necessitates proactive participation in international organizations and global forums and summits to shape global governance and to address international challenges. Such engagement provides Kazakhstan with a platform to demonstrate its diplomatic advocacy for Central Asian interests and aspirations, which is its central focus. Thus, Kazakhstan takes on

the role of regional leader, maintaining stability and enhancing economic cooperation between the nations of Central Asia. This includes mediation of long-running international conflicts, promotion of economic integration, and tackling challenges such as water resource management and regional security.

Kazakhstan's vigorous engagements in SCO and EAEU

Kazakhstan's performance in various international organizations, has underscored this dedication to fostering international cooperation and bolstering regional stability. The level of its involvement (summarized in Table 2) gives a qualitative indication of its middle power status from the behavioral and functional perspective. Since its appearance as a member of the United Nations in 1992 [20], Kazakhstan has exhibited its commitment to addressing critical issues and concerns. Kazakhstan's election as a non-permanent member for the 2017-2018 term afforded it a significant opportunity to make vigorous contributions for sustainability in international arena. Throughout its tenure, the state has established initiatives associated with nuclear disarmament, while ensuring action-points to counter terrorism as a substantial threat, and asserting peaceful instruments on conflict settlement, which were determined to advance efforts to combat the financing of terrorism [21]. In addition, Kazakhstan has been an energetic member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which has been providing security across the Central Asian region. Significantly, Kazakhstan was a founding member of the SCO, which has promoted economic cooperation initiatives and highlighted the acute problem of terrorism. In accordance with the aforesaid, the country directs the organization to focus on the development and implementation of measures to combat terrorist and extremist associations in the region within the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) [22].

On the security dimension, in 2022 the country was elected co-chair of collaborative and cooperative military exercises and intelligence and reconnaissance operations. These exercises and investigations were mainly focused on counter-terrorism commitments. In this regard, Kazakhstan organized the Peace Mission 2022, a joint military exercise aimed at improving the military and strategic coordination among the members of the organization. These exercises included scenario-based role-playing models of urban combat, and various types of hostage rescue operations,

which incorporated special exercises on the strategy and tactics of negotiations with terrorist leaders and extremist representatives. As an illustrative example, in September 2022, these tests were organized in Tajikistan, which were targeted at combat operations with terrorists in mountainous areas and other places without ready access to water, food, and communication.

In terms of Kazakhstan's participation in high-level conferences and dialogues, in May 2022, the country held an International Conference with respect to the topic of preventing and prohibiting the use of Internet resources for terrorist purposes within RATS. The following month, Almaty conducted specialized training in drone surveillance and digital intelligence collection.

This cooperation has yielded concrete results. More than 500 potential terrorist attacks were prevented thanks to the creation of joint databases which pooled intelligence information from the participating countries. Under Kazakhstan's chairmanship, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization held three large-scale military exercises involving more than 20,000 military personnel. Kazakhstan also initiated five pivotal conferences and high-level meetings concerning digital influence on terrorist movements and issues related to security in the border areas.

Kazakhstan's participation in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which proactively seeks to create a unified common market and customs union, is perhaps even more important. By facilitating the free movement of goods, services, and capital, it effectively increases the productivity and economic strength of the region. This also helps fulfill one of Kazakhstan's main interests – diversifying its economy. Kazakhstan accounts for around 20% of the union's trade. It mainly exports crude oil products, radioactive metals, and uranium ore, and imports automotive parts, telecommunications equipment, and pharmaceuticals, with trade relations growing slightly over the past few years with Russia.

Table 2. Evaluation of Kazakhstan's middle power status via SCO and EAEU engagement

Issue-point	SCO Engagement	EAEU Engagement
Membership	A state is considered as a founding member since 2001.	A state is regarded as a founding member since 2015.
Focus Areas	Security framework, establishment of measures on fight against terrorism and religious extremism, reinforcing regional stability.	Advanced focus on economic integration, facilitation of trade connections.
Security Cooperation	Participation in the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) to extensively combat terrorism and extremism, participation in Joint military exercises such as Peace Mission in 2022.	Focus on economic security in order to reduce the dependence on natural resources such as oil and natural gas.
Economic Cooperation	Participates crucially in energy and trade cooperation, which is considered critical to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a logistical transit hub.	Highly promotes and advances trade by involving the natural resources, namely oil, uranium, natural gas and metals, and additionally, agriculture products.
Economic Diversification	Advocate for broader economic activities beyond hydrocarbons, aiming to attract Chinese investment in infrastructure.	Pushes for economic diversification through non-traditional sectors (agriculture, tech, manufacturing).
Diplomatic Role	A state might be identified as a diplomatic hub, facilitating high-level summits, namely Astana Summit, Astana International Forum 2023, Astana International Think Tank Forum 2024, where simultaneously significant state-actors, organizations and institutions participates fairly.	A state has performed an intermediary role between dominant powers such as Russia and China, and via that lens, a state has shaped regional economic policy within the union.
Regional Leadership	A regional leadership is held through the initiatives on countering terroristic acts through RATS, and significantly, organized the Syrian peace talks, namely the Astana Process, highlighting its leadership.	A state's leadership can be viewed via the relevance of its advocacy in order to pursue regional economic reforms, which will influence customs and contemporary trade policies within the given union.

Source: compiled by authors

Active engagement in international organizations and initiatives

Kazakhstan's proactive diplomacy in various international organizations and institutions, has proven its dedication to fostering international cooperation and bolstering regional stability. Such expressions of regional leadership provides evidence of middle power status from the

functional perspective. Since the appearance as a member of the United Nations (UN) in 1992 [20], Kazakhstan has exhibited its commitment to addressing pivotal and critical global issues and concerns. Prominently, Kazakhstan's election as a non-permanent member on the UN Security Council for the 2017-2018 term has provided an opportune platform to make an active contribution for international

security and sustainability. Throughout its tenure, Kazakhstan has established initiatives associated with the program of nuclear disarmament, ensuring measures to counter terrorist acts, and asserting peaceful means and instruments of conflict resolution. Kazakhstan's intensive efforts to adopt UN Security Council Resolution 2395 [21] to combat the financing of terrorism exemplify such leadership.

On this issue, Kazakhstan's membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) has been a testament to its dedication to joint defense [22]. It has participated in joint military exercises and security tests, endeavoring to address challenges and concerns in relation to the Eurasian region. Kazakhstan has emphasized its commitment to multilateral cooperation within the CSTO framework towards fostering regional stability.

More broadly, Kazakhstan has used its diplomatic initiatives to establish its position as Central Asia's leader, facilitating cooperation across the region to address its challenges. It has emerged as an effective mediator with a reputation as an honest broker for facilitating conflict management and peace-building both regionally and globally. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Kazakhstan has initiated the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), which is seen as a multilateral forum whose objective is to enhance and deepen a dialogue and cooperation on security issues in the Asian region [22]. Though they ultimately failed, it is also worth mentioning that Kazakhstan's mediation efforts in the Ukraine crisis, resulting from Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. To deescalate tensions and attempt to resolve the crisis peacefully, Kazakhstan became a trusted ground for fostering dialogue, hosting numerous rounds of peace talks and international forums, the so-called Astana Talks.

Furthermore, the country initiated the Astana Process on Syria, a forum for convening critical stakeholders including Russia, Türkiye, and Iran to diplomatically settle a rather protracted conflict. Astana has served as the venue for multiple rounds of negotiations, focusing on formulating ceasefire agreements, delineating conflicting zones, and orchestrating and

preparing a delivery of humanitarian aid. That the Astana Process has complemented United Nations' own efforts underscores the Kazakhstan's commitment to enhancing and promoting peace-building initiatives and stimulating constructive dialogue among parties.

Though the main vehicle for Kazakhstan's drive to assume regional leadership in Central Asia has been diplomatic initiatives, its economic dimensions of its strategy should not be overlooked. In terms of economic potential, Kazakhstan's significant resources and strategic position have made it a vital player in Central Asia. The country's robust economy, based primarily on rich oil, natural gas and mineral reserves, has attracted significant foreign investment and facilitated economic integration within the region. Initiatives such as the Shining Path economic policy and the Nurly Zhol infrastructure development program have strengthened Kazakhstan's economic influence, promoting growth and development both domestically and regionally. Others, such as the Astana International Financial Center and the International Center for Green Technologies and Investment Projects (ICGTIP), attract foreign investment and promote sustainable development in Central Asia. In addition, Kazakhstan's active participation in initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) highlight its commitment to regional economic cooperation and integration [22]. Kazakhstan's collaborative approach to regional economic development underscores its commitment to promoting prosperity and cooperation.

To further enhance economic integration, Kazakhstan prioritizes cross-border cooperation and connectivity initiatives to facilitate people-to-people exchanges as well as trade and investment in Central Asia. Kazakhstan is also looking beyond Central Asia with ambitious projects such as the Western Europe-Western China Economic Corridor, which is predominantly aimed and intended to improve transport connectivity and promote economic integration [23].

In addition, Kazakhstan encourages entrepreneurship, innovation and

technological progress to stimulate economic growth. Initiatives such as the Digital Kazakhstan program and the Astana International Financial Center create a favorable environment for business development, attracting foreign direct investments and stimulating innovation in non-resource sectors. Kazakhstan's emphasis on economic diversification reflects its commitment to building a resilient economy.

Kazakhstan also plays a key role in addressing various regional issues in Central Asia, including water resource management, security cooperation and transboundary cooperation. With extensive experience in water resource management, Kazakhstan has led initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable practices and addressing transboundary water issues. For example, Kazakhstan's participation in the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program aims to improve water resource management and infrastructure development to promote regional stability and cooperation.

Kazakhstan's path to economic development is closely intertwined with the state's active desire for regional leadership. As the country seeks to diversify beyond natural resources, initiatives such as Nuryl Zhol and Digital Kazakhstan are designed to enhance and develop the country's capacity for economic sustainability and competitiveness. Accordingly, through investment in technology, particularly in agriculture and food processing, and a corresponding focus on renewable energy sources, Kazakhstan is increasingly seeking to reduce its dependence on variable natural resources and unstable commodity markets to promote ongoing sustainable growth.

Kazakhstan aims to leverage its geostrategic location via the physical and the economic integration promised by the BRI and the EAEU. They will likely open up opportunities for increased trade and investment, thereby enhancing the country's regional influence [21]. Thus, Kazakhstan's ability to maintain its momentum and pace of economic growth, and thus consolidate its position as the middle power of Central Asia depends upon the successful and prosperous implementation of these strategies.

Results and reasoning

Our analysis of Kazakhstan's role as a developing middle power in Central Asia region and the wider interstate system has revealed several key points:

- Geopolitical significance is characterized by the strategic location of the country, which places Kazakhstan at an important crossroad, enhancing its trading profile. Kazakhstan's has fulfilled this role between East and West since its independence.

Theories of International relations generally characterize middle powers as significant regional actors with, moderate economic development and diplomatic presence who are nevertheless relatively insignificant at the global level, as evidenced by their lack of a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and their lack of nuclear weapons.

Kazakhstan's increasing perception of itself as a middle power, as seen in the Google Trends statistics, tracks with the success of its diplomatic engagement with international organizations, strategically important partners, particularly in its implementation of international initiatives.

- a. Internet users' queries on the topic of Kazakhstan as a middle power have been evidenced by substantive fluctuations over time. Moreover, the first significant increase in queries occurred in May 2005, which was the earliest manifestation of recognition of the middle power status in relation to the country.
- b. However, from February to March 2024, a peak in the popularity of search queries was noted.
- c. Since 2020, as illustrated in the statistics, there has been a noticeable boost in the query "Kazakhstan is a middle power", which reflects on the awareness of social media and search engine users.
- d. Given the results and implications, there was initially a moderate and then a rapid increase in the relevance of the middle power status in relation to Kazakhstan.

That perception finds further support in the average indicators in the Global rankings, which placed Kazakhstan roughly in the middle. It ranked 76th out of 167 countries on the Global Peace Index and 58th out of 145 countries in the Global Firepower index, though its military budget for 2022 was only about 0.5% of its GDP, well below the global median of 1.34%. Its conduct in addressing specific international crises such as the Syrian conflict is characteristic of a middle power as well. The country's annual real GDP growth is 4.2%, in which notable advances in technology, services and manufacturing have significantly reduced the economy's dependence on natural resource extraction.

Kazakhstan has demonstrated its ambitions for the economic integration of Central Asia by taking a lead role in the drive to create the more stable security environment required for that vision to be realized. It has led intensive initiatives on nuclear non-proliferation, and developed counter-terrorism measures during its tenure as chairman of the SCO in 2022. In addition, Kazakhstan's participation in the EAEU initiatives clearly demonstrates the country's dedication and commitment to economic, trade, and industrial cooperation in the wider regional framework.

Conclusion

Set against the backdrop of intensifying international competition, Kazakhstan's geopolitical role as a stabilizing and balancing force and an effective mediator, is becoming increasingly important in modern times. It has committed itself to a policy of multilateralism and diplomacy, which allows it to successfully navigate complex geopolitical realities and, at times, even shape the trends and future of Central Asia.

The ability to chart one's own path in the face of opposition is the essence of power. While we have shown Kazakhstan's potential as a regional leader in Central Asia, it is also important to consider the alternative hypothesis that Kazakhstan will ultimately fall short of middle power status. For example, while Kazakhstan has made

strides towards diversifying its economy the question remains over whether it can sustain those efforts over the long term. Considering the dominant powers influencing Central Asia, if not, it will find itself constrained and thus unable to act independently enough to be considered a middle power.

Kazakhstan's engagement within international organizations and its decisive role in conflict settlement issues and peace-building operations represent its growing stature as a responsible global actor. Through far-looking diplomatic engagements and the correct management of key initiatives, Kazakhstan has showcased its purposefulness to maintain peace, strengthening stability, and collaborative partnerships both on the regional and global levels.

This article contributes to a broader understanding of the prospects and trends in how emerging middle powers navigate the complex landscape of international relations. Further research and discussion on this topic could lead to a more in-depth analysis of Kazakhstan's role as a middle power in Central Asia and how this affects the development of the country and the region.

One path future research could take to better understand Kazakhstan's place in the interstate system is to apply a classical realist perspective, as opposed to the hierarchical, functional, and behaviorist perspectives. The hierarchical perspective looks at some of the same indicators of power as does realism, while the other two perspectives focus on elements that are more related to the liberal internationalist school of thought. Yet, all of them limit themselves to state-level factors as the determinant of power, even as power is ultimately a relative concept [8]. Thus, it could prove fruitful to perform a quantitative analysis of to determine, for instance, whether the other Central Asian states follow Kazakhstan when it diverges from China or Russia's preferences. Alternatively, a qualitative study of a few cases in the same vein might shed some light on Kazakhstan's standing as well.

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ҚАЗАҚСТАНДЫ ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯДАҒЫ ҚАЛЫПТАСЫП КЕЛЕ ЖАТҚАН ОРТА ДЕРЖАВА РЕТІНДЕ ПОЗИЦИЯЛАУ

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ПОЗИЦИОНИРОВАНИЕ КАЗАХСТАНА КАК РАЗВИВАЮЩЕЙСЯ СРЕДНЕЙ ДЕРЖАВЫ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

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