CEGREG Yearbook

Central Asia in Global and Regional Governance

2025

Edited by
Ikboljon Qoraboyev
and Zhaniya Bekshora

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Contents

Editorial Introduction

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This inaugural issue of the CEGREG Yearbook appears in the first year of the Center for Global and Regional Governance (CEGREG) at Maqsut Narikbayev University (MNU). CEGREG was established in 2024 within the International School of Economics of MNU to advance high-quality research in international relations with a distinctive focus on global and regional governance viewed from Kazakhstan and Central Asia. The Center was conceived at the intersection of two dynamics: the maturation of our International Relations program and the University's transition toward a research-intensive institution. The yearbook aligns tightly with these founding goals. It offers a platform that trains emerging scholars, showcases faculty–student collaboration, and articulates Central Asian perspectives in ongoing global debates. As a series, the yearbook aims over time to become a credible academic source that features research not only from MNU but also from the broader community of scholars working on related themes.

The rationale for a Central Asia–grounded yearbook on global and regional governance is straightforward. We approach "global governance" in the broad and now standard sense, as defined by the UN Commission on Global Governance in 1995: the sum of the many ways—formal and informal—by which public and private actors at multiple levels manage common affairs in conditions of deep interdependence. As an analytical framework, global governance also serves as a heuristic for tracking the accelerating complexity of world politics. Even amid a growing backlash against globalization, interdependence remains a defining feature of world affairs. The infrastructures, rules, and practices that span borders have not receded; they have multiplied and diversified. States, regional organizations, firms, standard-setting bodies, courts, and civil society groups now coproduce norms and manage interdependence across sectors—trade and finance, digital platforms, critical raw materials, climate and water, public health, and security. For Central Asia, this reality is particularly salient. The global pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the transformation of the international order have sharply re-politicized interdependence, intensified sanctions diplomacy, and reconfigured supply chains—all of which now penetrate the region more directly than before. At the same time, connectivity

agendas—China's Belt and Road Initiative, the EU's Global Gateway—together with the green transition, digitalization, and renewed regional consultations among Central Asian leaders have amplified the region's profile as both an object and a subject in world politics. In short, the world is "coming closer" to Central Asia, and Central Asia is stepping forward into world affairs. This twin movement heightens the need to delineate regional perspectives, to study how global rules and regimes are interpreted locally, and to consider how Central Asian experiences can inform global scholarship. It also implies an outward-looking research agenda: studying how major partners of the region are updating their own governance toolkits, and what that means for Central Asia's strategic choices. The yearbook is designed to meet this demand for analysis, interpretation, and articulation. Our editorial approach is to produce outputs that are regionally grounded and empirically driven, methodologically sound, and in dialogue with global scholarship.

This first issue of CEGREG Yearbook is organized into three sections. The opening section presents three undergraduate graduation theses from the BA in International Relations programme. Eligibility to write a thesis is selective, based on a GPA threshold and successful completion of the Research Methods course; the resulting projects were presented and refined through the CEGREG Student Research Seminars, where students received collegial critique from faculty. The second section features student research papers: two selected from the inaugural CEGREG Student Conference on International Relations, Foreign Policy and Diplomacy (May 2025), one produced as a problem-based learning (PBL) output under faculty supervision, and one prepared by CEGREG student interns. The third section republishes four analytical op-eds from the THRI–CEGREG Joint Publication Series—a partnership with The Hague Research Institute for Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia—reflecting CEGREG researchers' contributions to ongoing policy debates. We are grateful to THRI for permitting their republication here.

The theses collectively speak to the yearbook's core theme—Central Asia in global and regional governance—by connecting conceptual debates to country- and region-specific evidence. Aitmurzina's "Middle Powers in the Midst of Great Power Rivalries: The Case of Kazakhstan" examines Kazakhstan's evolving posture as a middle power in a rivalrous international environment. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and discourse analysis, the thesis shows how a long-standing multi-vector foreign policy is now reframed as a strategy of risk management and identity performance: Kazakhstan positions itself as a bridge and mediator while seeking strategic autonomy in energy, transit, and diplomacy. The argument

resonates with the broader insight that "middle power" is both an analytical category and a self-ascribed identity that legitimizes diplomatic behavior.

The thesis prepared by Mussirkep, Nurlybekova, and Temirbulatova analyzes how academic mobility and everyday interactions among students from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan studying in Kazakhstan generate a form of "social regionalism." Through interviews, they show that cultural proximity and shared educational spaces can deepen a sense of belonging to a Central Asian community, even as visa regimes and degree recognition remain barriers. The findings suggest that bottom-up identity formation complements elite-level regional consultations.

Barlybaikyzy and Duisen's thesis on "The EU Approach to Counter Foreign Digital Interference," turns to digital governance. By unpacking the Digital Services Act, the Code of Practice on Disinformation, EUvsDisinfo, and emblematic cases such as "Macron Leaks," the authors track the EU's movement from soft, platform-centric self-regulation toward more binding regimes that seek to reconcile information integrity with freedom of expression. Their analysis, based on critical discourse analysis and case study method, is highly relevant for Central Asia as governments and societies grapple with platform regulation, media literacy, and the geopolitics of information manipulation.

The student papers in Section Two extend these conversations across transatlantic relations, national digital policy, U.S. cybersecurity discourse, and critical minerals governance. Abdykalym, Igembay, Kamaliyeva, and Zhangbyrbaeva revisit the perennial question of a U.S.–Europe "drift." Deploying realist, liberal, and constructivist lenses, they argue that alliance recalibration should not be mistaken for disintegration of Transatlantic alliance: dense military coordination, economic interdependence, and a resilient community of practice sustain the partnership despite political shocks. For Central Asia, this matters because the durability of transatlantic alignment shapes the parameters of regional hedging and engagement.

Maratova, Mukhamedkaziy, and Mustafin's PBL-based paper on Kazakhstan's digitalization evaluates flagship initiatives—from e-government rankings to AI-enabled public services and education platforms—against risks related to external tech dependencies, data protection, and digital sovereignty. The authors conclude that the reform agenda is ambitious and transformative, but that durability will depend on robust regulatory safeguards and domestic capacity building. Rakhimzhanova and Nurzhanova analyze U.S. cybersecurity rhetoric across successive administrations (2006–2022), documenting a shift from technical

resilience to assertive deterrence and then to collaborative resilience. Combining content analysis and discourse analysis, they show how securitization has legitimated extraordinary measures and norm entrepreneurship—an instructive template for understanding how cybersecurity is framed in and around Central Asia. Finally, Amzin and Kemerbay compare critical raw materials (CRMs) governance in Brazil, South Africa, and China to derive lessons for Central Asia, arguing for institution-building, benefit-sharing, and strategic foresight to avoid a path of passive extraction. Their roadmap emphasizes local processing and credible regulatory regimes as prerequisites for leveraging the green transition.

Section Three turns to the THRI–CEGREG Analytical Series—policy-oriented essays authored by CEGREG researchers in partnership with The Hague Research Institute. It opens with Qoraboyev's essay "Critical Raw Materials as an Emerging Pillar of Central Asia's Geoeconomic Centrality." The piece highlights how critical raw materials (CRMs) have entered global narratives about Central Asia, often framed through Western concerns about China's dominance in this sector. While this attention enhances the region's profile, the article argues that Central Asia should not be reduced to a supplier within great-power rivalries. Instead, the region must articulate its own perspective, investing in knowledge economies and higher-value segments of global supply chains to strengthen agency and ensure long-term benefits from CRM development.

The section continues with four further essays. Qoraboyev's "Trump 2.0 and Central Asia" interprets the current U.S. presidency as a hybrid phenomenon—transactional and disruptive, yet embedded in institutional power—and maps plausible implications for the region. Saginbekova examines the growing centrality of strategic trade controls (STCs) to global economic statecraft and their implications for Central Asian states caught between Eurasian and Western regulatory pressures. In a third op-ed, Qoraboyev explains Central Asia's stance on Northern Cyprus as a pragmatic balance between Turkic solidarity and multilateral legitimacy. Finally, Bekshora analyzes hydropolitics in Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan relations, showing how competing yet complementary narratives—agriculture and "good-neighbourliness"—have contained tensions and sustained cooperation over shared rivers.

Taken together, the twelve contributions in this volume illustrate our editorial vision: that rigorous, regionally grounded studies from and about Central Asia can contribute to illuminating the evolving architecture of global and regional governance. They do so by linking theory to evidence, macro trends to country cases, and policy debates to methodological clarity.

They also demonstrate that student research, when properly mentored and curated, can speak meaningfully to scholarly and policy communities.

We offer this first volume with three hopes. First, it will be of immediate use to researchers, students, and practitioners studying Central Asia and its global entanglements. Second, it will help consolidate a scholarly community around the theme of Central Asia in Global Governance inviting contributions from colleagues across the region and beyond. Third, it will lay the foundation for a durable, annual, open-access series that strengthens Central Asia's voice in global academia. In doing so, we hope to strengthen comparative scholarship and contribute to a more inclusive conversation on global governance.

Ikboljon Qoraboyev & Zhaniya Bekshora

Astana, Kazakhstan

29th August 2025

Student Theses

Middle Powers in the Midst of Great Power Rivalries: The Case of Kazakhstan

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Abstract: The middle powers are in a complex regional and global position for strategic maneuvering due to the growing rivalry between the great powers. In contrast to the extensive literature on the competition of major powers, there is a limited number of comprehensive research devoted to the implementation of the foreign policy strategies of the middle powers aimed at preserving strategic autonomy. The analysis of Kazakhstan as a leading actor in Central Asia provides a broad assessment of the understanding of strategically significant states in world politics. Consequently, the literature review examines the elements of Kazakhstan's foreign policy, including diplomatic, economic and security aspects. By employing the theoretical framework of Gideon Rose's neoclassical realism, the study examines the internal factors of the state reflected in foreign policy. Comparative analysis of Indonesia and South Korea reveals strategic approaches for global and regional strengthening. This study examines the concept of balancing Kazakhstan's relations with China, the United States, and Russia using qualitative methods, including a discursive analysis of expert conclusions. Primary qualitative data in the form of 8 semi-structured interviews were collected from experts from analytical centers, higher education institutions and international research institutes. Based on the results obtained, the research revealed three main patterns of power imbalance in Kazakhstan's foreign policy: approaches to diplomatic interactions, evaluation of security autonomy and level of economic reliance on major powers. Consequently, the relevance of the research is to consider the changing role of medium-sized states in shaping the international order.

Keywords: middle power, Kazakhstan, foreign policy, balancing, Russia-China-US relations, major powers, international relations.

Table of contents

Introduction

In January 2024, the analytical center of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs for the first time included Kazakhstan among the middle powers of the world (Bakhtiyarova, 2024). According to the report, aspects such as the availability of diverse resources, a balanced foreign policy, the status of a regional leader in Central Asia, and a significant role in the Middle East corridor had a decisive impact. Svante E. Cornell, Director of the Institute of Central Asia and the Caucasus and the Silk Road Studies Program, explains that:

The country's economic sector is currently the most developed in the region, serving a leading role in promoting regional cooperation and ensuring the region's connectivity. Kazakhstan has gone beyond the region with international initiatives that cemented its role. In addition, its internal reforms make its status as a middle power increasingly sustainable. (Satubaldina, 2024)

By the end of 2023, the country's GDP was $264 billion with a population of 20 million people and had attracted $441 billion in foreign direct investment since 1993, indicating a leading position in the economic aspect compared to the countries of Central Asia (Cornell, 2024). As an example, Uzbekistan's GDP was $90 billion, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan each had $10 billion. Thus, the author emphasizes the misleading and inaccurate view of Central Asia as a passive region involved in the "Great Game" between major powers, in which Kazakhstan serves as a pillar of stability and development of the region (Satubaldina, 2024).

According to a German think tank, According to a German think tank, Kazakhstan's foreign policy regime has been developed through selective partnership with major powers to destabilize dominant issues (Gotev, 2024). This policy is not aimed at accepting a particular party, but at participating in all the interests of the parties. In turn, this leads to ensuring maximum independence and respect for one's own state interests, which is evident in Roman Vasilenko's statement. The Kazakh diplomat noted that in the current geopolitical condition, states such as Kazakhstan are able to contribute to international and regional issues through their own resources and diplomatic relations with the powers (Gotev, 2024). The multi-vector nature of Kazakhstan's foreign policy is reflected in the implementation of a non-confrontational and pragmatic strategy in order to ensure and maintain a balance of power. One possible implication of this is the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020-2030, developed by the administration of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. This document was adopted in 2020 during a period of complex transformation of international relations. It is aimed at achieving strategic goals, including maintaining the independence of the foreign policy

course, consolidating leading positions in the region, integration into the international community, increasing the competitiveness of the national economy, preserving the unity of the multinational people and protecting the practical interests of the citizens of Kazakhstan (Akorda.kz, 2020). It is worth noting that the implementation plans of the document are updated every two years. Thus, the Concept is relevant in the current geopolitical situation.

Despite the Western sanctions imposed on Russia, Kazakhstan continues to maintain industrial relations. According to the Bureau of National Statistics (2024), as of July 2024, there are 19,562 Russian legal entities, branches and branches of foreign legal entities with foreign ownership in the country. Moreover, 70% of transactions between states are made in rubles. Kazakhstan controls the transportation of Russian goods through the North-South transport corridor to Turkmenistan, India, Azerbaijan and Iran (Minakov, 2024). Kazakhstan's geopolitical landscape demonstrates its ability to ensure transport and trade flows not only with Russia, but also with China, especially in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. Along with Moscow, Beijing is increasing its trade partnership with Astana, significantly outstripping the Russian side in this matter. For example, the total volume of China's foreign direct investment in the Kazakh economic sector in 2023 amounted to $25 billion (Minakov, 2024). It follows that the volume of economic cooperation between the two countries has reached 41 billion dollars. Thus, Kazakhstan's strategic multilateralism makes it a channel for unofficial circumvention of the sanctions regime for Russia and China (Minakov, 2024). According to scientists, the geopolitical dynamics of Kazakhstan, depending on the interests of external players, can lead to a complex structure of cooperation, which can affect logistics supply chains.

Despite a decent amount of research on traditional middle powers such as Australia, Canada, and Turkey, the post-Soviet countries have been poorly studied. Along with the insufficient analysis of Kazakhstan's foreign policy strategies, the study acquires significance. Kazakhstan has an active multi-vector policy aimed at balancing between China, the West and the members of the EAEU, which is a new model of the middle powers. Thus, the relevance of the study is determined by the need to study the strategy of the Central Asian middle power in maneuvering interests between the three world powers.

The organizational structure of this thesis is as follows. The first section provides a literature review that examines the theoretical definition of a middle power, as well as a comparative analysis of the strategic mechanisms of the middle-power countries. The second section includes the methodology and analysis of the data collected during the semi-structured interviews, which describes in detail the systematic approach using a discursive analysis of the speeches of the interviewed experts. The following section presents the results of a study on the

effectiveness of Kazakhstan's foreign policy. In conclusion, the interpretation of the results is summarized.

Literature review

This chapter provides an overview of the literature on Kazakhstan's role as a middle power and its position in the great power rivalry. The literature review consists of three main sections: "Theoretical Framework on Middle Powers", "Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy" and "Comparative Analysis of Middle Powers" with a focus on South Korea and Indonesia. The study also considers subsections. The section "Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy" analyzes three important components: "Diplomatic Engagement", "Security Autonomy", and "Economic Partnerships". These variables reveal the nature of diplomatic strategies, the level of independence in making foreign policy decisions, and Kazakhstan's particip-ation in regional economic initiatives. The review examines numerous scientific articles on this topic.

1. Theoretical Framework on Middle Powers

The ideas of neoclassical realism (NCR) have been applied to the current study. According to Cerioli (2024), "NCR is a diverse analytical umbrella for Realist authors that complements a systemic framework with unit-level variables to differentiate actors, historicise and contextualise their actions, and enable space for agency despite pressures from anarchy" (p. 369). This theory includes the analytical capabilities of Kenneth Waltz's neorealism and Hans Morgenthau's classical realism to study the internal politics of states in the context of the international system (Firoozabadi & Ashkezari, 2016). Consequently, this theory studies the perception of the external impact of the international environment by the state apparatus, which includes three key variables: independent (systemic stimuli), intervening (leader's image, relations between society and the state, strategic tradition, national institutions) and dependent (policy response), which determines the choice of this theoretical paradigm.

The principle of asymmetry-authority (AA) framework underlying the model of neoclassical realism is explained in the form of a two-level model with external and internal factors of maneuvering states, taking into account the unevenness in power and political sovereignty (Kuik, 2021). It is a widely held view that the presence of competing powers leads to increased external instability towards the middle powers. This leads to the concept of the ruling elite being the main attribute at the level of a domestic variable. As a rule, the elite maximizes political authority through the following legitimization groups: a) procedural requirements in the form of the rule of law, democratic elections and social justice; b) the effectiveness of domestic policy development; c) particularist narratives such as identity

politics, charisma of the leader and nationalist sentiments (Kuik, 2021). Thus, this concept of neoclassical realism explains in detail the domestic factors influencing Kazakhstan's foreign policy decisions.

As for the concept of the "Middle Power", despite its historical significance in foreign policy literature and international relations, "the term remains deceptively ambiguous" (Chapnick, 1999). A number of scientists define middle-level states empirically, based on the level of military spending, the life expectancy of citizens and the population, without taking into account the recognition of the state at the regional level. Due to the different interpretations of the concept, it has led to an active debate in the scientific community about the exact definition of the term "middle powers". For example, Bernard Wood noted in his research that the following characteristics define middle-power states, namely the status of a sub-regional or regional leader, the presence of experience in a particular field, mediating and maintaining a balance between conflicting parties, increasing status in the international community through an alliance with a great power, and commitment to multilateral diplomacy (Cornell, 2024). Thus, the literature review presents three theoretical approaches for defining the above term: functional, behavioral and hierarchical. Since states in one model can be classified as a middle power while in the other as a small power, this makes it difficult to define consistently.

The functional model is based on the position of Canadian diplomat Hume Wrong in 1942 that Canada's participation in decision-making process in military matters should depend on three criteria: the degree of involvement, the ability to contribute to the discussion, and the level of government interest. Within the framework of the world order, functionalism was based on the understanding that the delegation of influence between middle-level states depends on their relative capabilities, as well as on economic and political time frames. This is due to the fact that there is no objective method for distinguishing between middle and small powers. For this reason, the middle powers are actually small powers with a temporarily elevated status (Chapnick, 1999). The inclusion of the functional principle was due to its beneficial influence in the international community. Canada stands as an example as the main representative of the middle power in the mid-1940s. The confirmation of the status of a middle power and the use of its economic development has given the Canadian state stability in solving political, economic and military affairs of the international system. Therefore, functionalism gives the temporary influence of the state to be able to impact certain decisions of major powers.

Existing research shows a preference for a behavioral model. According to Cooper, Higgott and Nossal, middle powers are defined by "their tendency to pursue multilateral solutions to international problems, their tendency to embrace compromise positions in

international disputes, and their tendency to embrace notions of 'good international citizenship' to guide their diplomacy" (Chapnick, 1999). This model is characterized by values in the form of multilateralism, conflict management and mediation, as well as the desire to enhance international status. Cooper notes that statecraft's concept consists of three parts: "building coalitions and promoting cooperation, providing entrepreneurial leadership, and acting as catalyst and facilitator" (Chapnick, 1999). It has commonly been assumed that "pursuing multilateral solutions to international problems, preferring compromise positions in international disputes and embracing notions of good international citizenship constitute the typical behavior of a middle power" (Shin, 2015).

Initially, the concept originated from a hierarchical school. This approach classifies states according to their capabilities in the following areas: size of territory, gross domestic product, volume of trade and foreign exchange reserves, population and number of military personnel (Shin, 2015). As a rule, statistical indicators are used to measure a country's potential. On the contrary, the Morgenthau school of classical realism explains the international phenomenon for the following reasons. The theory considers the middle powers as active players capable of influencing the system through strategic behavior and diplomacy, not just through material resources, as well as a constructivist approach to national security. According to classical realism, the concept of a middle power is defined as follows:

A middle power is a state actor which has limited influence on deciding the distribution of power in a given regional system, but is capable of deploying a variety of sources of power to change the position of great powers and defend its own position on matters related to national or regional security that directly affect it. (Shin, 2015)

2. Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy

Kazakhstan has pursued a distinct foreign policy strategy known as "multivectorism" (Zhiyenbayev, 2023). In a period of regional geopolitical instability, this policy is a stabilizing force, indicating the development of equal relations with regional and global powers. In practice, as Sullivan notes, multi-vector nature allows a less powerful state to mitigate dependency dilemmas by entering into an asymmetric relationship (Zhiyenbayev, 2023). This area has laid the foundation for effective cooperation with Russia, China and the United States to promote mutually beneficial interests. Nyshanbayev et al. (2024) noted that Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy reflects a balancing system in Southeast Asia, where the secondary powers maintain a balance between the great powers. Assistance of regional integration is one of the policy principles emphasized in membership in the Conference on Interaction and

Confidence-building Measures in Asia, election as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2017-2018 and OSCE chairmanship in 2010. However, the binary understanding of balancing and bandwagoning does not fully explain Kazakhstan's multifaceted foreign policy strategy, which includes elements of both strategies (Zhiyenbayev, 2023). Gleason defines a multi-vector foreign policy as a complex strategy based on a political approach capable of simultaneously countering the potentially adverse actions of several partners (Nyshanbayev et al., 2024). Hanks, on the other hand, views this foreign policy approach as a balance of risk and benefit. Based on this, it can be concluded that this concept is characterized as a practical balance of national forces and interests. According to the theory of neorealism, when the interests of the great powers in the region coincide, developing countries tend to react in two ways: balancing conflicting interests or bandwagoning. Swedish scholar Svante E. Cornell, in an August article discussing the growing middle powers in Central Asia, argues that through economic growth, strategic diplomacy and regional leadership, Kazakhstan is rethinking its status in the world community as a middle power (Satubaldina, 2025). According to Cornell:

The premise of the Kazakh foreign policy strategy was how to avoid being subjugated to the great powers or becoming an apple of contention among them. Further, the strategy sought to prevent a situation where the state has to engage in constant hedging among the great powers, jumping from relations with one power to another as necessity requires. (Satubaldina, 2025)

2.1. Diplomatic Engagement

According to Kenzhalina (2014), "Diplomacy is one of the most major tools forming a positive image of the state" (p. 652). It has commonly been assumed that Kazakh diplomacy follows such traditional principles as leadership, pragmatism and dependability (Cohen et al., 2021).

Thus emphasizing that in international relations, a hedging strategy is a common concept among small and medium-sized states to implement a dual imperative such as autonomy and security. According to Sim and Aminjonov (2022), the definition of hedging is characterized as "a set of strategies that cultivate a 'middle position' if a state 'cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality". Medeiros compares hedging with a strategy of geopolitical insurance in case of failure of interaction with a major power, which is one of the principles of this diplomatic strategy (Sim & Aminjonov, 2022). Today, Central Asian scholars agree that the region represents a complex of regional security, in which a hedging strategy aimed at maximizing security and autonomy

from each other, as well as from major powers, is more effective (Sim & Aminjonov, 2022). In this regard, Kazakhstan is a relatively active representative of this diplomatic strategy in relation to China. The state is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, as well as a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. It is worth noting that the People's Republic of China expressed a relatively negative position on the C5+1 meeting organized in February 2020 by the United States. A likely explanation for China's behavior in rivalry with the United States is related to its interest in promoting autocratic values or spreading the influence of an anti-democratic regime in Central Asia. Under the leadership of President Tokayev, Kazakhstan continues to prioritize the development of allied relations with Russia, focusing on expanding multilateral cooperation within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (Wang, 2024). According to the 2014 Foreign Policy Concept, Kazakhstan is committed to cooperation with Russia in humanitarian, trade, economic, political and cultural aspects, which is also based on the Treaty on Good Neighborliness and Alliance in the 21st Century of November 11, 2013. After the re-election of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in 2022, Russia was the first official international visit, which carries symbolic significance. As the President of Kazakhstan emphasized, "the Russian Federation has been and remains the main strategic partner, a state with which we have deep relationships in various industries" (Putz, 2022). From the point of view of Kazakh-American relations, the state uses a balanced approach to expand strategic cooperation with the United States. As an example, the influence of the United States extended to such initiatives as the United States Strategy for Central Asia for 2019-2025 and the C5+1 diplomatic platform. On February 28, 2023, the visit of former US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken Tokayev emphasized in this way that "in crucial strategic areas such as security, energy, trade, and investment, our countries enjoy a robust foundation of mutual trust and longstanding collaboration. We are eager to further enhance this cooperation" (Wang, 2024).

2.2. Security Autonomy

Kazakhstan has maintained bilateral relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization since 1992, when the country joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, established by the Alliance in December 1991 as a forum for discussing and coordinating security issues with its new partners (Aben, 2017). In May 1994, official practical security cooperation with NATO was established after the signing of the Partnership for Peace framework document. According to James Appathurai, "NATO Secretary General's Special

Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia, Kazakhstan is the alliance's most active partner in the region" (Aben, 2017). As highlighted in Kuzembayeva's (2016) analysis, Kazakhstan's active participation in the international arena within the framework of multilateral security mechanisms is conditioned by the desire to spread valuable European experience in Asia. Since the European direction occupies one of the key aspects in Kazakhstan's foreign policy. The Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) is a fundamental indicator for mutual cooperation between NATO and Kazakhstan. The purpose of this document is to provide assistance from the Alliance in meeting the priority needs of the state, especially in strengthening the country's security and defense sector. Since 1995, within the framework of the Partnership for Peace program, Kazakhstan has been involved in a number of program activities, including defense reform, military-to-military cooperation, civil-military relations, civil contingency planning and disaster response, professional training and scientific cooperation (Aben, 2017). Currently, Kazakhstan's multi-vector policy, focused on active participation in regional initiatives, is a significant practice for NATO. As an example, since 2002, the state has been participating in the Planning and Review Process under the Partnership for Peace program to increase interoperability between units of NATO member countries and the armed forces of Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is not aiming for full membership in NATO. However, as Aben (2017) noted, institutionalized cooperation with the North Atlantic Alliance is important for a state because of the following functions: expanding security cooperation in the Central Asian region, strengthening the armed forces, increasing regional stability, and neutralizing the external influence of major powers. One example is the "New Silk Road Initiative" presented by the United States in 2011 for Central Asia, aimed at strengthening its influence in the region by facilitating trade between Central and South Asia (Wang, 2024).

2.3. Economic Partnerships

In the context of the economic perspective, Kazakhstan's foreign policy adheres to a dual strategy of participation in two integration projects: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (Isaacs, 2020). The signing of the "Strategic Directions for Developing the Eurasian Economic Integration until 2025" by the members of the heads of the EAEU member states in 2020 highlighted the need to strengthen the organization's innovation and investment sector. In November 2022, 17 bilateral documents totaling $50 million were signed at the 18th Forum of Interregional Cooperation between Kazakhstan and Russia (Wang, 2024). It has been reported that the total investment volume of Russian companies in the first half of 2023 amounted to $1 billion, indicating that Russia is one of the

five largest investors in Kazakhstan. On the contrary, in June 2022, at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, President Tokayev emphasized that, "China is currently the main economic and foreign trade partner, and Chinese investments in our economy have exceeded $22 billion over the past 15 years. Thus, strengthening bilateral cooperation with China is crucial for our country" (Wang, 2024). According to data for the first half of 2023, the trade turnover between Kazakhstan and China amounted to $13.6 billion, with the Chinese side accounting for 20% of the total trade volume (Wang, 2024). As a result, trade increased by 20.5 percent compared to last year and strengthened China's position as a leading trading partner. The President of Kazakhstan noted that the Belt and Road Initiative "allows to create a new geo-economic paradigm" (Yerimpasheva et al., 2022). However, as noted by Yerimpasheva, Myrzakhmetova and Alshimbayeva (2022), some Kazakhstani experts express concern about the expansion of China's influence through this project. For example, author Heer argues that China's model of economic development and governance has serious consequences because the strategies and goals of the Chinese Communist Party do not match those of other countries in particular with the United States. According to the authors' SWOT analysis, the following strong priority aspects of the integration of two major projects, namely the EAEU and BRI, are presented: a) high demand for raw materials and goods on foreign and domestic markets; b) China's interest in developing land corridors; c) the availability of free economic zones (Yerimpasheva et al., 2022). Being between two major powers, Kazakhstan is in maneuvering as well as maintaining independence and gaining a competitive advantage. It is worth noting that in the post-Soviet space, Kazakhstan was the first to show interest in promoting economic cooperation and restoring collective networking. The weaknesses are as follows: a) the unstable geopolitical situation in the Eurasian space; b) Western sanctions against Russia and Belarus; c) the predominance of the political agenda in matters of EAEU integration (Yerimpasheva et al., 2022). Sustainable integration in the EAEU countries is not ensured due to the lack of developed democracy in the states. Despite this, opportunities such as the creation of transport and logistics centers outside Kazakhstan; attracting export cargo flows from Japan and South Korea through Lianyungang Airport; attracting foreign logistics operators to Kazakhstan; and the development of transit air transportation indicate the multi-vector nature of Kazakhstan (Yerimpasheva et al., 2022). Specifically, this indicates the strengthening of economic independence from China and Russia and strengthens its role as a neutral hub between the West and the East, demonstrating strategic balancing.

3. Comparative Analysis of Middle Powers

The purpose of conducting a comparative analysis is primarily to study the theoretical relationship in which the key pattern is the domestic or social characteristics of certain states. According to the literature of international relations, Indonesia and South Korea are considered representatives of the middle powers. Middle power theories suggest that soft power tools such as consensus building, participation in international mediation, and peacekeeping are significant foreign policy behaviors. The role of non-Western powers in the international order has led to the widespread use of the term 'middle power' to explain the foreign policy behavior of these states (Karim, 2018). It is noted about the legitimization of multi-vector nature, emphasizing that Kazakhstan positions itself as an independent player and a neutral mediator along with the same middle powers as Indonesia or South Korea. The main difference of which is the limited resources of soft power in comparison with the above-mentioned states.

South Korea

According to Zhang (2024), despite the fact that Korea is gradually becoming an influential regional power in East Asia and an increasingly active participant in global politics, it remains a "small power" compared to China and Japan. Recent researchers have pointed to the declining momentum in South Korea's diplomacy as a middle power. Against the background of the rivalry between China and the United States, in which Korea is faced with a dilemma of choice, the concept of "conditional bridging" is being put forward (Zhang, 2024). This approach puts forward the Republic of Korea as both a mediator in cooperation and an observer in resolving political issues. Moreover, the government adheres to a so-called "wait-and-see" strategy based on contributing to international relations between China and Japan. At the same time, Korea does not seek to demonstrate leadership in this matter, preferring a strategy of adaptation and deterrence. As an example, it is worth noting the APEC summit in November 2014, in which Chinese President Xi Jinping met with former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. In this symbolic turn, former President of the Republic of Korea Park Geun-hye proposed to resume the trilateral summit. This approach of South Korea, from restrained diplomacy to direct influence on the situation, is described as the role of a mediator.

Indonesia

As noted by researcher Karim (2018), as is the case with other developing powers, Indonesia's desire to play a more active role at the global level is a logical consequence of its material potential and recent political and economic development. From the point of view of material capabilities, Indonesia belongs to the group of middle powers, but in political discourse this concept has been used in rare cases. Foreign policy circles prefer to refer to Indonesia as

"a regional power with global interests and concerns" (Karim, 2018). During the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014), the state participated in such political events to strengthen its international status as the 13th session of the Conference of the Parties in 2007, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the 9th World Trade Conference. It is worth noting that Joko Widodo is the former president of the Republic of Indonesia. Despite the fact that the concept of a middle power was adopted during his presidency, he restrained Indonesia's desire for this status. As a result, the government adheres to a revisionist position. Thus, empirical analysis defines Indonesia's self-identification as a middle power as a deterrent to its orientation to the regional level and its desire to assume the role of a regional leader in order to demonstrate global prospects (Karim, 2018).

Methodology

1. Research design

The purpose of this study is to examine the key factors influencing the positioning and foreign policy decisions of Kazakhstan as a middle power in the context of interstate strategic rivalry. This study uses a qualitative research method that assists in explaining and interpreting social phenomena, as well as identifying the perception and behavior of the target audience. At its core, quantitative research asks open-ended questions, the answers to which are not easily expressed in numbers, such as "how" and "why" (Tenny et al., 2022). In detail, this approach involves the systematic organization, description, collection, and interpretation of visual, textual or verbal data (Hammarberg et al., 2016).

Consequently, the primary data is collected through semi-structured expert interviews, combining both unstructured and structured elements. As noted by Easwaramoorthy and Zarinpoush (2006), "Interviews are useful when the topic of inquiry relates to issues that require complex questioning and considerable probing" (p.1). In this case, to obtain analytically valuable expert answers to the submitted open-ended fixed and follow-up questions. The semi-structured interview scheme is not limited to a strict set of questions, thereby allowing the researcher to delve into the search for high-quality information in more detail.

As for the theoretical approach, neoclassical realism is the most relevant for describing the research method. This school of thought implies the capacity to elaborate on the content of strategic choice, with an emphasis on how states respond to the pressures they are subject to by the international system (Mallett & Juneau, 2023). This distinguishes it from Waltz's realism or structural realism, relying directly on structural aspects to explain international conditions. Within the framework of neoclassical realism, it is appropriate to consider the domestic political

aspects of Kazakhstan that influence foreign policy decisions.

For the data analysis strategy, discourse analysis was used, specializing in the exploration of the structure, content and function of language in a social and political context. This strategy has contributed to the formation of key concepts such as "middle power", the definition of relevant discursive models used by experts during interviews, as well as the analysis of their own positions on Kazakhstan's strategic maneuvering. As mentioned, primary and secondary data are used for data collection, in which secondary data includes the collection of information from official statements, scientific articles and analytical reports.

2. Research question and hypotheses

The main research question is: "What are the internal and external considerations determining Kazakhstan's strategy as a middle power in the context of current geopolitical competition?". The following two research hypotheses are highlighted, offering the expected result to the above question.

Hypothesis 1: The domestic factors of Kazakhstan's strategic course depend on leadership preferences, bureaucratic capabilities, and political and economic realities of the state.

Hypothesis 2: Kazakhstan adheres to a pragmatic balancing strategy that determines foreign policy decisions in order to preserve strategic autonomy.

3. Data collection

The participants were selected using a non-probability method of purposeful sampling. This method was chosen by conducting qualitative research on a difficult-to-access area of analysis, in this case on the topic of the middle powers. The study requires the involvement of a narrow circle of respondents with specific knowledge or relevant professional experience in international relations, political science or regional studies. The sampling method does not require significant time to collect data, which makes it easier to collect qualitative analysis. In addition to the respondents' experience and knowledge, accessibility and willingness to participate, as well as the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in a clear, expressive and reflective manner, are also important (Palinkas et al., 2015).

As mentioned, the primary data was conducted in the form of semi-structured expert interviews. During the interview, eighteen open-ended questions were posed to clarify the participants' views on foreign policy strategies, regional cooperation, theoretical foundations

and reflections on the future prospects of Kazakhstan. The participants provided both detailed proactive responses, as well as neutral and concise ones. The respondents were recruited through professional contacts, including experts in the field of foreign policy, independent researchers, and professors from higher education institutions. Interviews with all participants were conducted online via the Zoom platform due to the flexibility and convenience of time for respondents. The interviews were conducted in two languages: English and Russian, and ranged from 13 to 54 minutes.

It is worth noting that an audio recording was provided for the interview for further transcription and analysis of responses with the participant's permission. The approval of ISE Committee for Scientific Research at Maqsut Narikbayev University was obtained for the collection of primary data. This provided guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality for the interviewees who reviewed the informed consent form. The description of the form outlined the purpose of the study, a brief description of the types of questions, the voluntary nature of participation, as well as the anonymity of the respondents' answers.

4. Data analysis

Interviews were conducted with eight respondents, including two female and six male persons: representatives of educational institutions such as L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University and the Nazarbayev University's Graduate School of Public Policy, experts from the Turkic Academy and the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, employees of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies (KazISS) and independent researchers in the field of foreign policy from the analytical center "Eurasian Monitoring" and Zhibek Zholy TV channel. It took two weeks to collect the data, with an average interview duration of 33 minutes. The dialogue in both languages was transcribed using the TurboScribe software with editing of spelling errors after transcription. Then, the Russian version of the text was translated into English to further encode the main themes and discourses of the primary data. Thus, this method of discourse analysis made it possible to describe the process of using language in terms of cognitive, emotional and situational aspects.

Findings

1. Conceptualization of the Middle State

Based on the information provided by the participants at the beginning of the interview regarding the theoretical basis of the concept of middle powers, it can be noted that this definition does not have a specific fixed explanation.

The majority of participants, namely 5 out of 8, emphasized that powers in this category have the ability to exert influence beyond their immediate environment, balancing external influence and opposing commensurate states. To a more clarifying question about possible criteria for including states in this category, the participants mentioned the following aspects: economic potential, measured by GDP, diversification of resources and accessible trade networks of different countries; diplomatic tools in the form of the ability to mediate between other powers, the creation of a coalition, the formation of global norms, as well as some influence on a geopolitical field; and a certain strategic autonomy. At the same time, 3 out of 8 respondents noted the vagueness of the above-mentioned term and the lack of its specificity. As an example, interviewee 6 points this out as follows:

"The concept of "middle power" seems conceptually vague and often devoid of meaningful analytical value. In the modern international order, it is often used as a "comforting term" for states that have neither the military nor the political influence of great powers".

This uncertainty may reflect a deconstruction of the concept, the validity of which depends on the political or research context. According to an expert from the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, the phrase *"comforting term"* does not reflect analytical rigor, but rather giving states the symbolic and psychological status of a middle power in order to declare their own international subjectivity. It is worth noting about the applied narratives of other experts such as *"There is no common concept of the middle power. Each researcher, each scholar defines it in their own terms"* (Interviewee 7) and *"I think that middle power is something that is constructive. It is constructed by some German or maybe other experts to describe the positioning of small and middle countries"* (Interviewee 4). Thus, the concept of a middle power has a fluidity feature for analyzing the positions of states in this case with Kazakhstan, and is also one of the representatives for scientific debates in academic discourse.

It is noteworthy that the question of defining Kazakhstan as a middle power also caused a hesitation in the answers. According to the analysis, three respondents noted a positive response, two — expressed a combined position, and three — emphasized that Kazakhstan is a potentially developing middle power.

To confirm the affirmative statement, the participants repeatedly emphasized the ideas

of Kazakhstan's active participation in UN peacekeeping operations and the regulation of certain conflict situations, such as the Astana process on the Syrian issue, as well as the voluntary abandonment of nuclear energy and the distinctive diplomatic activities of the state. According to the expert from the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies (KazISS), the most important criterion for determining Kazakhstan as a middle power is foreign policy behavior. The respondent identified the following four focuses: a) maintaining peace and stability in the international system, as well as participating in various international peacekeeping initiatives; b) availability of a wide range of international tasks; c) expanding international services to benefit from cooperation; d) a leading position in solving international issues. As an example for the fourth point, the respondent highlighted the consultative meeting of the heads of State of Central Asia held on August 9, 2024, at which a number of documents were adopted, including the concept of regional development "Central Asia – 2040", prepared by the delegation of Kazakhstan and agreed with other states. According to the expert, *"It is a diplomatic tool to promote one's vision of development"* (Interviewee 1).

In terms of an ambivalent answer, the respondents mentioned that for certain Western theorists, Kazakhstan cannot be considered a middle power according to the following criteria related to population density and large GDP, however, as the participant 3 noted, *"...in terms of real policy, international processes, and our peacekeeping mission, in principle, it meets the requirements (Kazakhstan is considered a middle power)"*. On the one hand, frequently used phrases such as *"availability of resources"*, *"active diplomacy"* and *"participation in regional initiatives"* demonstrate signs of a middle power in Kazakhstan. On the other hand, it is a widely held view that *"dependence on external factors"*, *"limited autonomy"* and *"weak influence on global processes"* cast doubt on its status as a full-fledged middle power.

Regarding the third group of respondents, one of the participants shared the opinion that Kazakhstan is an emerging middle power that is on its way to becoming a full-fledged middle power, emphasizing the following: *"Well, Kazakhstan in its official discourse and rhetorically positioned itself as a middle power. However, in analytical terms or in more research terms, I would say Kazakhstan does not fully qualify for this term"* (Interviewee 8). According to the expert, this is directly related to the following four main factors. Firstly, the low level of a diversified economy is in contrast to the classical middle powers (e.g. Canada, Australia, Turkey or South Korea). Since, Kazakhstan remains dependent on free energy resources, mainly natural gas, oil, and petroleum products. Secondly, there is a lack of autonomous defense potential, due to the fact that most of the military equipment and training is provided to Kazakhstan by Russia. Thirdly, there is a low percentage of reliable and transparent democratic

institutions, as the state is currently in the process of institutional reforms. Fourth, Kazakhstan does not support a consistent global projection of soft power. According to the respondent, *"Kazakhstan, what it does, it does portray its middle power primarily to bolster domestic support from the public and also to help it realign with the local powers"* (Interviewee 8). In addition, such ideas as *"Kazakhstan's middle power, I believe, is more of a myth rather than a functional reality"* (Interviewee 8) and *"We are not a middle regional state yet because it has its own critiques"* (Interviewee 4), were mentioned. These narratives demonstrate the gap between realistic opportunities and the political rhetoric of the state, as well as the insufficient legitimization of the status of a middle power.

In addition, it is worth noting the preferences of 6 out of 8 participants of the theoretical school, which turned out to be neoclassical realism. This option is due to the fact that foreign policy is formed not so much on the basis of institutional interests, but rather depending on internal political and economic realities, as well as system-level constraints, because of its geopolitical location in close proximity to Russia and China. This is followed by the presence of variables at the domestic level, including the rivalry and interests of the elites, which can be emphasized in the context of the January 2022 events. Moreover, the respondents noted that the choice of this theoretical school is explained due to its relevance in the current geopolitical system, and this is emphasized in the form of statements, *"I like liberalism theory, but unfortunately the recent events in international policy show that the realism school is more relevant and appropriate and applicable in today's geopolitics"* (Interviewee 4), *"...when you become a diplomat and really face these problems, you see that the only theory which is applied in international relations is realism"* (Interviewee 5) and *"The most appropriate theoretical framework, in my opinion, is neoclassical realism"* (Interviewee 6).

2. Foreign Policy Strategy and Behavior

During the interviews, 7 out of 8 respondents expressed a common opinion on the issue of Kazakhstan's foreign policy approach towards major powers, namely China, Russia and the United States, expressed in a balancing strategy. According to neoclassical realism, this strategy assumes that domestic policies often limit states' balancing efforts, which leads to an imbalance (Wojciuk, 2021). For this reason, the factors influencing the effectiveness of a balanced approach are presented as the vulnerability of the regime to internal challenges, the degree of social cohesion, and the level of consensus among the elite regarding the scale of strategic risk.

The participants emphasized the need for the above approach due to geopolitical tightness, noting such ideas as *"When a country remains between two countries, it always leads*

to one side accusing the other of moving closer to the other" (Interviewee 1), *"Therefore, we are balancing on their interests and on our interests"* (Interviewee 3) and *"We have to balance between these three great powers. And of course we can't afford to be in confrontation with these countries"* (Interviewee 7). In addition, there is a clear bias of Kazakhstan towards Russia, which may reflect overlapping attempts at balancing. According to respondent 6, one of the factors of this is the country's participation in such integration projects as the CSTO and the EAEU, and despite statements about the multi-vector nature, Kazakhstan is still structurally and institutionally tied to the Russian sphere of influence, which limits its foreign policy maneuverability. An example is the comment of respondent 4 that, *"Russia is our destiny, right, at least for the next 50 years"*.

It is also worth noting the opposite opinion offered by one respondent regarding Kazakhstan's position, which can be described as calibrated hedging. This is primarily due to maintaining strategic security ties with Russia and growing economic cooperation with China, including multilateral and bilateral agreements such as the Belt and Road Initiative. The following narratives were used about the United States: *"rather cautiously"*, *"far for us"* and *"not so seriously yet"*. According to an expert from Nazarbayev University, *"Kazakhstan usually historically has served as a buffer zone between the unstable South Asia and the more or less stable Europe and Caucasus"*. The respondent stressed that there is an asymmetric foreign policy because Kazakhstan still prefers Russia and China in its foreign policy rather than Western powers and often adopts *"some ambiguous postures"*. As an example, this may be reflected in the fact that Kazakhstan has avoided official recognition of the Taliban government, but is still cooperating with it.

Moreover, it is worth emphasizing the number of mentions of powers by experts, where: Russia was mentioned 17 times, emphasizing the "dominance" of this actor in the perception of foreign policy; China — 12 times, noting the increasing role of the state in political and economic influence; and the United States — 6 times, indicating the remoteness of the power. Thus, the gap between the first and second actors is not large, which may indicate a potential alternative in China.

Furthermore, both the limitations and advantages of Kazakhstan's strategic autonomy were revealed. Based on the respondents' responses regarding the benefits, the experts emphasized the availability of minerals, the geographical location in the center of the Eurasian continent, the presence of large foreign oil and gas companies (e.g. CNPC, Chevron and TotalEnergies), the diplomatic traditions of Tokayev and Nazarbayev, as well as the acceptance of commitments in international organizations. In the case of natural resources, this is

confirmed by phrases such as *"Our natural resources are of course our leverage"* (Interviewee 7) and *"So I think one of the most – I would say pros or enablers of Kazakhstan's economy is, of course, vast natural resources"* (Interviewee 8). Nevertheless, there are an equal number of aspects that limit strategic autonomy, namely dependence on Russian military and infrastructure imports, a political system that restricts any innovation in terms of institutional reforms, China's growing influence in the transport and investment sector, as well as national identity. Regarding the narrative of the diplomatic tradition, respondent 4 noted the uniqueness of diplomacy, which contains *"Asian elements"* and *"Russian-speaking, Soviet, old-minded pragmatism"*. This is noteworthy because it is the national pattern, which includes various religious, linguistic, mental and regional differences, that is one of the limitations of autonomy. Since, the participant of the Turkic Academy emphasized that *"We are not a homogeneous, let's say, consolidated nation. We still have debates on the national language, for example"*. A similar discourse can be traced in the dynamics of the presence of foreign oil and gas companies, whose influence serves as a certain guarantee against external pressure and dependence on infrastructure, transport and investment ties with major powers, which limits autonomy.

It was reported that domestic policy is closely integrated and interdependent with foreign policy. Because it is the internal behavior that acts as the main function in shaping both the internal and foreign policy of Kazakhstan. This is due to the centralization of power in the system centered around the president. It follows that foreign policy reflects the interests of the top leadership and a narrow elite group, rather than a parliamentary faction or any other groups. According to the respondent,

"So foreign policy narratives, like the topic of today's discussion, portraying Kazakhstan as a middle power, is employed rather, I think, to bolster the regime in front of the people and the international community rather than reflecting any actual geopolitical standing that Kazakhstan is utilizing" (Interview 8).

For a comparative analysis, it is worth quoting the statement of the following respondent:

"Leadership is important. For example, before Tokayev, we used to say that Kazakhstan foreign policy is another way of foreign policy. But after Tokayev came to power, we see that this oligarchic structure also shapes foreign policy. So, leadership is also important" (Interview 5).

Based on the above-mentioned expert opinions, it can be noted that foreign policy depends on the leadership and personality that pursues a technocratic and flexible foreign

policy. In addition, such detailed ideas about the foreign policy apparatus as *"to be loyal to the system"* and *"top decision-making is still unclear"* were mentioned, indicating bureaucratic costs and lack of transparency in the decision-making process. This leads to a decrease in the adaptability of institutions and institutional memory, which is not a consistent foreign policy. As the foreign policy expert noted, *"Foreign policy is a subject which is very complicated for the main public"* thereby pointing out the problem with the voice, reflecting criticism from society. This is expressed in the accusation of the leadership for "abandoning" national interests for the sake of foreign influence.

In the speeches of the participants, the narratives "integrated" and "interdependent" were often used in the direction of domestic and foreign policy. Thus, the influence of internal factors cannot be overestimated. In Kazakhstan, foreign policy is largely a function of internal political and economic realities and the personal interests of the ruling elites. The lack of a systematic foreign policy school, the weak involvement of civil society, and dependence on the position of the Russian Federation and China turn foreign policy into a "reactive tool" rather than a "strategic resource".

An important factor is also the multi-vector strategy, marked by the effectiveness of 6 out of 8 respondents, as well as a decrease in its efficiency by two participants. A multi-vector strategy is a term coined by former President Nazarbayev, but the strategy is currently under increasing pressure due to increased geopolitical tensions, especially in connection with events in Ukraine and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It has generally been assumed that a multi-vector foreign policy provided some flexibility and unipolarity after the Cold War, a unipolar or multipolar world. However, the current situation is characterized by systemic rivalry between Russia, China and the West, complicating the situation of Kazakhstan. This leads to an inability to function in their own interests, forcing them to maneuver. The participants emphasized this as *"...the only policy that is possible in our realities"* (Interview 1) and *"Multi-vector approach remains effective. But when the roll goes off in one direction, that's when it stops working"* (Interview 3). On the other hand, respondent 6 notes that *"Kazakhstan is faced with the need to choose, but continues to demonstrate uncertainty"*, emphasizing that a multi-vector strategy can only work if there is genuine strategic autonomy, strong diplomacy and economic independence, *"...which is not yet observed"* (Interview 6).

3. Regional Positioning

Regarding the soft power tools used by Kazakhstan in the form of cultural diplomacy, education, mediation or international initiatives, the respondents presented different points of

view. The majority noted the effective use of educational initiatives, while 3 out of 8 participants expressed the limitations and lack of soft power.

According to an independent researcher from the "Eurasian monitoring" analytical center, *"Kazakhstan is doing well in all these areas"*. Despite the reflection of the cultural context in the following initiatives, such as the participation of the Kazakh delegation in EXPO 2025, held in Japan on April 13 and October 13, as well as the holding of the World Nomad Games, educational activities are the predominant component. An example is the Bolashak scholarship, which provides graduates with the opportunity to study abroad on a funded basis and remain employed by local or international organizations. This is confirmed by the words of a respondent from the Eurasian National University that, *"Only education can make our young people competitive in this new emerging world"*. Participant 4 emphasizes the idea that *"...Kazakhstan could be an education hub in Central Asia, even in a wider region"*. At the regional level, this may indicate the image of the state as a potential platform for the international exchange of competencies, while at the global — this is due to the fact that the state is able to compete with larger powers through educational technologies. On the contrary, participant 5 expressed doubts about the educational paradigm of soft power, emphasizing that, *"...but seeing that some foreign students are coming to Kazakhstan to study, we can say that I'm not sure whether it's Kazakhstan's soft power or those universities' soft power"*. This phrase clearly expresses critical and skeptical discourse. Regarding the remaining soft power tools, namely international initiatives and participation in peace negotiations, the respondents expressed that these efforts did not produce a sustainable result due to limited resources and a weak reputation base.

This leads to the question of Kazakhstan's positioning as agenda setting or a rule taker in the following organizations: the SCO, the EAEU, and the CICA. Based on the responses received, it is worth noting that the state adheres to both positions in the above-mentioned organizations. Although Kazakhstan's role as an active participant in promoting stability and economic development has been mentioned repeatedly, it is worth noting that the country plays an ambiguous role. In institutions led by Russia, such as the Eurasian Economic Union or the Collective Security Organization, Kazakhstan mainly acts as a rule taker due to the existing structural asymmetries. As a respondent from Nazarbayev University noted, *"Russia has more influence, more power, and that's why it primarily allows itself to dictate some of the rules to the neighboring countries"*. However, on the platforms of the United Nations, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Kazakhstan is *"trying"* to position itself more as an agenda-setting body whose role is still limited. First of

all, due to the lack of institutional capacity, independence and regional consensus that Kazakhstan could become a leading country. According to respondent 6, the following explanation was given:

"In the EAEU, Kazakhstan more often acts as a performer, following in the wake of Russian politics. Within the SCO and CICA, Kazakhstan's role is less defined - it does not demonstrate initiative, and the structure of these organizations is not sufficiently institutionalized to have a lasting effect on the image and influence of the state".

In addition, a participant of the Turkic Academy provided a link to the book "Central Asia: the Views of Washington, Moscow and Beijing" by Russian expert Dmitry Trenin, which emphasized that the SCO is based on three pillars, namely Russia, China and Kazakhstan, indicating a certain voice in this organization.

Half of the respondents were critical of the narrative of "regional leader" and the attachment of this status to Kazakhstan. The main reason for this is the avoidance of regional hegemony in Central Asia, preferring a pattern of "cooperation" rather than "leadership". In the context of cooperation with the Central Asian states, experts highlighted Uzbekistan in particular. For example, a respondent from the KazISS put forward a statement on the existence of informal mutual understanding in the form of the formula "Successful Uzbekistan – successful Kazakhstan", emphasizing the intention to mutual development and the absence of the need for competition. According to an expert from the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy:

"Until recent times, we used to say that Kazakhstan is the rising star of Central Asia. But now I think we should act together with Uzbekistan. If Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan unite their strengths, I think the region will also be strong" (Interview 5).

This phrase may indicate the transition of hierarchical discourse to multilateral cooperation on such potential factors as changes in the political elite, the progress of external pressure and the increased activity of regional states. In addition, the concept of *"integration"* was used, which is considered controversial due to the *"risks of Islamization and demography"* as well as Kazakhstan's double standards due to the participation of projects led by Russia. The narratives used as "big brother" and "leaders" in relation to Kazakhstan determine the opinion about Kazakhstan's leadership positions in the region. However, Central Asia is a divided region and, as a result, there is no regional organization of its own, as well as problems in the field of water supply. Thus, to a certain extent, Kazakhstan can be considered a regional leader, primarily due to its economic superiority and investments in infrastructure. However, this leadership is limited by the lack of political influence on neighbors, and integration initiatives

are not sustainable.

4. Geopolitical Challenges

Kazakhstan's foreign policy adaptability to geopolitical changes presented the multilateral opinions of experts. The majority of respondents, namely 5 out of 8, noted the following adaptation features: compliance with the principles of foreign policy, promotion of cultural and diplomatic initiatives, and immunity to the influence of major actors.

Despite its traditional allied relations with Russia, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Kazakhstan has taken *"very careful steps"* to adjust its foreign policy to the weak institutional context abroad. It was emphasized that Kazakhstan *"openly avoided endorsing Russia's actions in Ukraine"* (Interview 8) after the president's non-recognition of the separatist regions of Ukraine at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in 2022. Thus, Kazakhstan confirmed its commitment to territorial integrity, and also tried to expand its activities with the European Union, Turkey and some partners in East Asia. In addition to the interest of cooperation from the European Union, there is also a growing role of the C+5 format. However, according to one of the respondents, *"...at this stage there are no signs of a significant adaptation of the foreign policy course"*. Kazakhstan maintains an inertial model of behavior, mainly responding to external challenges, but not forming its own proactive strategy.

From the point of view of the economic factor, as previously noted, dependence on exports of raw materials and infrastructure projects involving China, as well as trade and logistics ties with Russia, seriously limits the space for independent foreign policy. Attempts to diversify within the framework of cooperation with Turkey or the EU are being made, but they are fragmentary and symbolic. This is confirmed by the statistical data of the respondent, which indicates the number of unprofitable investments in the amount of 2.5 billion dollars and the volume of trade with Russia is approaching 30 billion dollars and with China it is about 44 billion dollars. Moreover, the participant noted the logistics southern corridor leading to Afghanistan, Pakistan or the Indian Ocean. Thus, Kazakhstan is trying to revive Silk Road initiatives, most of whose infrastructure projects are funded by China.

Unlike classic middle powers such as Turkey, South Korea, and some other countries, Kazakhstan lacks reliable infrastructure, military capabilities, and a limited military presence abroad. An example is Turkey, which maintains a military presence in Syria and some neighboring regions, indicating that it defends its interests through military interventions. In turn, Kazakhstan has no military bases outside the country, with the exception of several UN peacekeeping contingents in the Golan Heights in Syria. A distinctive feature is also the

consideration of the point of view of the middle power in decision-making.

5. Potential Foreign Policy Trajectories

In this section, the respondents proposed various ideas for the formation of Kazakhstan's foreign policy in the coming years, taking into account the risks and opportunities in the context of current global trends. In addition, 3 out of 8 participants left this question open.

One of the respondents noted that *"There are many risks, as well as opportunities"*, while another — noted an optimistic trajectory for development, explaining that *"Kazakhstan is an attractive country for investments from large countries, as well as international banks like the World Development Bank or the Asian Development Bank"*. A participant from the Eurasian National University emphasized the immutability in foreign policy, *"...the state apparatus will continue in the same spirit as it is now"*, but noticeable shifts in demographic, social and linguistic factors. According to the respondent, the risks are mostly related to linguistic, territorial and economic pressures from the Russian side, as well as China, which is developed in the field of artificial intelligence, digital governance and social engineering. From the point of view of domestic factors, the expert promotes the idea that *"half of our people are isolated, they're leaving in a very repressed world"*, emphasizing the lack of education of the population.

Phrases such as *"We have no other way"*, *"...we need to continue our multi-vector foreign policy"* and *"...we cannot have bad relations"* with the European Union, the United States, China, and Russia are repeatedly mentioned. This creates a lack of alternatives, indicating the normalization of the current foreign policy course. The most possible trajectory is to maintain the status quo with minor adjustments. On the contrary, respondent 6 asserts the possibilities of the state as a more active diplomacy and strengthening regional leadership through economic and logistical initiatives. However, as it was noted, *"...much will depend on the transformations in Russia itself"*.

In addition to the political context, the participants shared their views on aspects of Kazakhstan's foreign policy that remain insufficiently explored in academic and applied research. Respondent 2 mentioned the economic contribution to the academic and educational sector. According to an expert from the analytical center, Kazakhstan's investment in research and development (R&D) has a very small percentage of investments in this area, which leads to a weakening of the educational sector. To obtain an accurate percentage, the ranking of countries in the world by the level of research activity for 2019 was analyzed, including a comparative analysis of published peer-reviewed articles by national scientific communities. It is worth noting that more recent data for at least the last three to four years is not publicly

available. Kazakhstan ranked 61st out of 197 with 2,367 published articles per year. The participant also gives an example of the poor condition of laboratories in higher educational institutions in Kazakhstan, where *"they contain those devices that were still available in the 60s. That is why there is this weak development, or one might say, stagnation in the educational sphere"*.

In the context of political research, one of the participants suggested focusing on issues of soft power, the potential role of interreligious dialogue, peace initiatives, and the role of education in uniting peoples. The following phrases, such as *"civil society"* and *"strength of the people"* emphasize the expert's idea of building a stable and flexible relationship between the people of Central Asia, noting the importance of certain actions on the part of civil society groups, especially youth, academics, researchers and journalists. Moreover, it is necessary to develop academic diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy and information diplomacy. These suggestions are justified by the fact that:

"So I think that when you ask about liberalism, we recall in mind the importance of the morale, values, principles. This is very important. Especially now when the democracy and liberalism is not in the rise, in decline, temporarily. So we need to focus on the values, on the universal values, which unites people like dignity, equality, democracy, human rights, and things like that" (Interview 4).

The following necessary studies were also mentioned, such as Kazakhstan's policy in the Turkic world, the benefits and costs of Kazakhstan's participation in the EAEU, the mechanisms for shaping foreign policy decisions within the country, the role of informal institutions and the influence of elite groups on the international agenda.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is worth noting that Kazakhstan's status as a middle power in Central Asia has caused a significant rethink for the region. Central Asia is considered as a region of the "Great Game", in which the rivalry of major powers takes place, while the local states are dependent territories. However, as shown in the study, this description is not accurate and not correct. As a representative of a medium-sized state, Kazakhstan has strengthened cooperation between Central Asian states to address regional issues. Thus emphasizing that for external actors, the officially approved status of middle power is an important factor.

Despite the lack of a theoretical general concept of middle-class states, the analysis of the semi-structured interview showed the consistency of a multi-vector strategy. The internal factors expressed in the social cohesion of citizens, bureaucratic elements of leadership and

consensus of the elite fully reflect the systemic incentives of Kazakhstan's foreign policy decisions. As indicated by the limitations of the subject with the ability to strategic discourse. The approach based on active diplomacy and a balanced pragmatic strategy demonstrates that the concept of a middle power expresses the self-identification of a discursive plan in the context of Kazakhstan's foreign policy, and not just an analytical feature. This allows us to conclude that the state strives for strategic autonomy in the international system.

Conducting comparative characteristics between states claiming the status of middle powers reveals similarities and differences in foreign policy and domestic policy. Kazakhstan adheres to its role as a transit bridge between the West and the East, as well as a neutral mediator in regional and international issues. Accordingly, this approach emphasizes the implementation of a risk minimization strategy and the strengthening of the strategic autonomy of the state. Through a semi-structured interview, the proposed hypotheses about internal factors in domestic politics and a pragmatic balanced approach in foreign policy were proved.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the author used TurboScribe tool in order to transcribe the respondents' responses into a text version for further analysis. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as necessary and takes full responsibility for the final version of the diploma project.

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Regional Integration in Central Asia: Analyzing Perceptions of Central Asian students studying in Kazakhstan

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Abstract: Regionalization–the act of strengthening the inter-state with social ties-attracted important attention in global governance studies of the political, economic, and cultural ties of specific geographic areas. The customary focus of Central Asian integration efforts has been elite-level agreements and state-led initiatives. China and Russia are external powers influencing these initiatives. However, limited attention has been paid to how individuals, particularly youth engaged in academic mobility, experience and interpret regional integration from the ground up. This study addresses this gap by examining the perceptions of international students from Central Asian countries currently studying in Kazakhstan. Those students from Central Asian countries are studying within Kazakhstan. Exploring youth perceptions about regional cooperation, identity, and participation across cross-border education, the research is based on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 20 students from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Educational exchanges along with shared cultural frameworks seem to encourage a stronger feeling of regional belonging political narratives spread locally strengthened. This study contributes to the political science and international relations literature by introducing a youth-centered approach to regionalism with constructivist lens. It offers practical recommendations for policymakers and educators seeking to strengthen academic partnerships and foster more socially grounded strategies for Central Asian integration.

Keywords: Central Asia, regional integration, youth identity, academic mobility, constructivism

Table of contents

Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the five Central Asian republics faced different challenges within Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan while engaging in various forms of regional cooperation. National cultures differed alongside major powers like China and Russia exerting external influence with border disputes occurring. These are factors that hinder regional integration (Rustami, 2025; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, et al., 2018).

Despite this, at the 2024 summit, the Central Asian presidents agreed on a roadmap for regional integration. Such as the Central Asia 2040 strategy, which includes an action plan for industrial cooperation (2025-2027) and enhanced reinforcement of trade, energy, and transport partnerships (The Diplomat, 2024).

Leaders of the nations of Central Asia have different views with regard to regional integration. President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev stresses that "a successful Central Asia is a successful Kazakhstan", thereby confirming the need for multilateral cooperation (The Astana Times, 2024). At the same time, the President of Turkmenistan, Serdar Berdimuhamedov, remains committed to the neutrality of his country, denying all possible integrations within the region (Daryo News, 2025). In addition, Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev supports cooperative projects, in particular the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, while Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon promotes digital transformation as a driver of development. Kyrgyzstan's President Sadyr Japarov highlights transport infrastructure as a means to stimulate economic growth (Daryo News, 2025). Moreover, Emomali Rahmon advocated for digital transformation for regional development, while Sadyr Japarov highlighted transport infrastructure as one of the means of stimulating economic growth (Daryo News, 2025).

Most discussions on this topic focus on economic and political efforts, forgetting about the prospects and influence of youth on strengthening regional integration. Given that young people are future politicians and economic figures, understanding their views can provide valuable information about the long-term sustainability of regional cooperation. Therefore, particular attention should be given to Central Asian students who participate in academic exchange programs within the region.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand how students perceive regional integration and whether the younger generation is forming a common Central Asian identity. By examining the perception of youth, this study expands the scope of discussions about regional integration. This research contributes to the existing literature on Central Asian

regionalism by incorporating the perspectives of Central Asian, expanding broader discussions on ideational factors that underlie regional integration. Following that, this study seeks to answer the following research question: "How do Central Asian students studying in Kazakhstan perceive regional integration, and how does their experience reflect the emergence of a shared regional identity?".

Literature review

External and Internal Determinants of Regional Integration

Integration in political science, especially in the context of post-Soviet states has been a contentious issue in recent years. Integration of the Central Asian region has been shaped by both external and internal factors, including its historical reliance on the Soviet economic system and the diversity of national interests among its states (Rustami, 2025).

Rustami (2025) says that the model of integration used in places like Europe is hard to apply to Central Asia, as five Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have different histories, cultures, and governments that make them different from other attempts to integrate the region. Following the Soviet Union's collapse, these nations prioritized national sovereignty over regional cooperation, making the reintegration of their economies and political structures into a broader union a persistent challenge (Allison, 2004).

Principal nations, economic linkage, with political division greatly shape regional consolidation within contexts like Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Southern Africa. Even though regional organizations help to manage external pressure, maintaining national independence remains a key concern. Russia and China exert competing influence in Central Asia, with Russia leveraging security alliances and economic dependencies (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace et al., 2018), while China promotes its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an alternative model (Dadabaev, 2013). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) encourages cooperation in the region, but the competition for power between Russia and China has led to more complex policies among Central Asian countries, which has an impact on diplomatic flexibility, stability in the region, cooperation and many other factors (Filippo, 2018).

Institutional Models and Theoretical Frameworks

Academic researchers such as De Haas (2017) and Cooley (2015) share the view that Central Asian integration is driven by economic, security, and political cooperation through organizations like the SCO, CSTO, EAEU, and CAREC. These organizations improve trade, coordinate security, and build up infrastructure. Furthermore, integration within organizations like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is often seen as incompatible with Central Asia's unique cultural and political traditions (Bohr, 2004). Buzan and Waever (2003) suggested regional security complex theory discusses the idea that historical, political, and geographic factors shape regional security dynamics, reinforcing the continued influence of historical ties on Central Asia. The absence of a NATO-equivalent organization in Asia further suggests that a collective regional identity in Central Asia is far less developed than in Europe (Hemmer & Katzenstein, 2002). Additionally, the region's diverse cultural, ethnic, and political landscapes further hinder the development of a unified regional identity (Isaacs & Polese, 2015).

Political Leadership and Bilateralism

From a political standpoint, many scholars do not consider Central Asian regional integration to be successful. Saqib and Naazer (2023) and Park (2025) argue that Central Asian regionalism remains limited due to external forces like China, Russia, and the EU. The countries are more interested in bilateral ties with China than in the development of integration institutions. Additionally, the Belt and Road Initiative has intensified competition for Chinese investments. Using a liberal intergovernmental perspective, Saqib and Naazer (2023) explain that states avoid deep integration because national leaders act in self-interest, and cooperation only occurs when economic benefits align.

Juraboev (2025) and Kazhenova (2024) share the same opinion. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia was able to form greater regional integration, but political leaders disagreed on fundamental matters and fought over ways for regional leadership. Kazhenova (2024) examines approaches of the presidents of Kazakhstan as well as Uzbekistan and then concludes conflicting strategies obstructed any integration. As a president, Nazarbayev advocated for deep economic and political integration. Karimov, however, remained skeptical due to his fear of losing sovereignty. Kazhenova (2024) describes within her research that Uzbekistan began moving closer to Kazakhstan after Mirziyoyev's election.

Economic Integration and Infrastructure Disparities

There are notable differences in economic strategies as Kazakhstan focuses on integration into global markets and active participation in the EAEU market, while Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan has historically avoided participation in large economic unions (Juraboev, 2025). Despite these challenges, Rustami (2025) assumes that there is a need for a shift toward a more flexible integration framework in Central Asian region, allowing cooperation without a necessity for a full institutionalization. Therefore, this perspective aligns with findings on multilateralism in Asia, where regional cooperation is driven more by pragmatic interests than ideological unity (Jetschke & Lenz, 2013).

Over the past decades, trade integration between the Central Asian countries has noticeably intensified, but continues to face a number of systemic constraints. Moreover, one of the main obstacles to deepening trade integration is the low level of development of transport infrastructure, which as a result leads to high logistical costs in the region. In addition, the absence of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in the EAEU limits opportunities for comprehensive regional integration. These countries prefer to enter into bilateral trade agreements with countries such as China, Iran and Turkey, which limits opportunities for comprehensive regional integration.

On the other hand, the membership of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the EAEU facilitated the simplification of trade procedures between them (Cieślik & Gurshev, 2024). However, the region's dependence on external trading partners, primarily China and Russia, remains high and continues to experience a decline in integration processes (Vinokurov et al., 2022).

Cultural Regionalism and Identity Formation

Culturally, the formation of a unified regional identity is disturbed by political instability and nation-building processes, despite common historical, linguistic and religious roots (Mayer, 2021). In response, initiatives aimed at strengthening regional cooperation are being undertaken, such as the UNESCO Silk Road Project as well as large-scale events, including the World Nomad Games and the Central Asian Cultural Forum in Khiva (UNESCO, 2024; Mayer, 2021).

Changes that happened in Uzbekistan's foreign policy under President Mirziyoyev have opened up new opportunities for regional cooperation, while Kazakhstan is actively promoting cultural diplomacy in order to strengthen integration (Mayer, 2021). One of the main limitations is the lack of a regional academic mobility program similar to Erasmus+, which hinders interstate exchange in the educational field (Costa Buranelli, 2021).

Educational Regionalism and the Role of Youth

Högselius's (2022) idea of "hidden integration" looks at other ways of integrating people that are not associated with politics as technical and physical infrastructures. Although government leaders do not emphasize integrated infrastructure, they still share geopolitical location as well as the use of water resources, railways, and electric grids, which connect Central Asian countries. The EAEU and CAREC drive economic integration primarily through trade liberalization, infrastructure, and investment (Mirzoev, 2006).

Abduvaliev (2024) says that the CAREC 2030 strategy's goal is to connect the area to global markets by encouraging diversification, making it easier for investors to generate money flows and making connections stronger. Kazakhstan handles 80.9% of trade within the region (Ahunbaev et al., 2022, p. 50). However, issues like being landlocked, relying on natural resources and strict rules stop further growth (Ahunbaev et al., 2022; Medukhanova et al., 2022). Even with these problems, regional cooperation is still supported by bilateral deals, infrastructure projects, and changes to the way institutions work. The EAEU and CAREC strengthen business ties, and the SCO and CSTO help keep the area stable (Asian Development Bank Institute, 2014).

In addition to economic and political cooperation, regional integration also contributes to people-to-people interaction strategies. Initiatives such as the European Erasmus Program or Turkiye Burslari have demonstrated how education can serve as a soft power tool to strengthen a common identity.

Opinions of young people differ greatly from those of their parents and grandparents, as they have not yet faced the challenges of the modern world (Starr, 2024). In turn, Amutuhaire (2024) investigated the impact of regionalization of higher education on student mobility in East Africa. In his methodology, he used a mixed method involving 200 international students and found that this affects the development of academic partnerships and the strengthening of educational standards.

In addition, the regionalization of education is based on historical authority, which is associated with economic and political inequality between the countries of the region. Thus, regionalization contributes to the development of higher education, however requires the elimination of structural gaps within the region (Amutuhaire, 2024).

The World Bank (2023) indicates that regional partnership in higher education is one of the essential ways for Central Asian countries to work together more effectively. Sharing school supplies, students can exchange with other countries, so all lessons can be ensured to be similar because these actions might all improve the level of education toward more cooperation in the

region. ASEAN's experience shows that higher education can integrate regions in an important way. Because of academic cooperation in ASEAN, Buszynski (2019) argued that regional research networks have in fact been strengthened and it has become a reason for the rise of educational standards. Therefore, Central Asia could adopt similar strategies to enhance collaboration in higher education, particularly through joint research initiatives and student mobility programs (Lorenzo, 2021). Chou and Ravinet (2016) further discuss that education strengthens regional cooperation and criticize the Eurocentric bias in regionalism studies, calling for more context-specific research.

After a thorough review of the relevant literature on Central Asian integration, it is evident that many studies examine the common areas such as historical, economic, and geopolitical aspects of regional cooperation. However, considerably less attention has been given to how young people, especially students participating in academic mobility perceive and experience the processes of regionalization at the level of everyday life. This bottom-up perspective offers valuable insight into the extent to which notions of regional unity resonate within societal consciousness. In this context, it is crucial to examine how higher education institutions and student networks can function as sustainable drivers of regional cooperation.

Methodology

This research is grounded in a constructivist perspective, which assumes that regional integration is not only shaped by formal institutions or material conditions, however also by people's ideas, perceptions, and lived experiences. Current study emphasizes ideational dimensions, such as shared values, regional identity and cultural familiarity. Youth narratives and symbolic associations contribute to understanding regionalism from the bottom up approach.

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative method to understand how they view regional integration plus if youth in Central Asia form a common identity across borders. The main method selected from all methods for data collection was through semi-structured interviews. This format offers flexibility while still allowing thematic consistency. The subject matter can remain rather uniform. It is effective especially toward understanding complex, ideational phenomena. Strict questionnaires or just numerical instruments cannot properly examine topics like local affiliation including selfhood development.

In a semi-structured format, students could express their views using their own words, maintaining focus on political cooperation, identity and academic mobility. This approach aligns with the constructivist assumption that reality is socially constructed through interaction and meaning-making.

Participant Selection and Sampling

Research focused on 20 international students from Central Asia currently studying in Kazakhstan. Participants were recruited from Maqsut Narikbayev University (MNU), KIMEP University, KBTU, and the Medical University of Astana (MUA).

Purposive sampling was used to select students who met the key criteria: they were citizens of a Central Asian country (other than Kazakhstan) and enrolled in a Kazakhstani university. To enhance diversity, snowball sampling was applied, as a result, initial participants referred peers within their Central Asian networks. This strategy helped reach underrepresented groups, including Turkmen students.

Data Collection Procedure

Interviews were conducted between late March and mid-April 2025. Initial outreach was made through Outlook, WhatsApp and Telegram applications. Participants received a digital informed consent form, which detailed the study's aims and ensured voluntary participation. All students confirmed participation by ticking a box; no physical signatures were required.

Interviews were conducted both in person and via Zoom, depending on participants' preferences. Most conversations were held in Russian, the common lingua franca. Audio was recorded using Zoom and iPhone voice memo apps. Some interviews were video-recorded, while others were audio-only based on participant comfort. All data was securely stored in a password-protected Google Drive folder.

Transcription was conducted using a Telegram bot for Russian and English-language interviews and manually for Kazakh interviews. All personal identifiers were removed to protect confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method was the method used to analyze interview transcripts. This approach enabled the research team to identify and categorize patterns across the data.

A deductive coding approach was applied, based on pre-formulated research questions and interview themes. Analysis focused on semantic content rather than latent meaning in order to to maintain the integrity of participant narratives.

The coding was conducted collaboratively using Google Sheets, allowing for organized review and categorization. The team identified four major thematic clusters:

- Cluster 1: Background and motivation
- Cluster 2: Social and cultural integration
- Cluster 3: Barriers and opportunities
- Cluster 4: Identity shifts and perceptions of Kazakhstan

Cross-checking and collaborative refinement of themes ensured consistency and accuracy throughout the coding process.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was secured through the university's internal review board. Participants were informed about their right for withdrawal at virtually any point, including during or after the interview. Current study ensured complete anonymity, which indicates that no names were recorded or used in the final analysis. All audio and transcript files will be deleted upon submission of the final thesis.

Findings

Background and Motivation

Attraction of Kazakhstan as an Educational Destination

A notable factor that influenced the decision of many participants to study in Kazakhstan is the advantages of Kazakhstani education. Many referred to the quality of education, international accreditation, and the availability of modern infrastructure at universities. The majority of participants also noted that the availability of full or partial scholarships, competitive programs or intergovernmental initiatives was crucial. One student was accepted through a law program jointly run by the Ministry of Justice of Kazakhstan, while others mentioned receiving merit-based scholarships after passing standard exams.

After getting acquainted with the activities of universities, students from Tajikistan and Turkmenistan decided to study in Kazakhstan. Participants liked the presentation of educational institutions made by the university administration or the feedback from other students already studying in Kazakhstan. Some also noted that Kazakhstan has become more attractive than Europe as it is geographically close and affordable.

Russian as a Lingua Franca

Their decision was also influenced by the ease of communication due to their knowledge of the Russian language and the fact that many of them have social connections such as friends and relatives, which reduces cultural and logistical barriers.

Social and Cultural Integration

Institutional Support

Many students emphasised that they had seamlessly integrated into academic life abroad. Especially those who were fluent in Russian or Kazakh. In addition, due to living in a dormitory, participating in academic projects and participating in joint cultural events, social integration took place in natural conditions. Institutional efforts, such as introducing classes or support from international offices, were critical for international students, and many were provided with them.

Common Language

These interactions allowed the students to find a common language with their peers from neighboring countries. Students most often communicated with Kazakhs and other Central Asian immigrants, especially if participants are from culturally close countries such as Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Cultural Similarities

Moreover, some noted that integration was easy due to the already similar culture and mentality. Traditional views on life, such as respect for elders, hospitality, and more, are very similar among the Central Asian region. Participants also mentioned that child-rearing practices, gender roles, and integrational communication followed similar patterns. Shared emphasis on family and moral behavior created a familiar environment.

Barriers to and Opportunities for Regional Integration

Bureaucratic Challenges and Institutional Barriers

The survey participants identified bureaucracy as the most persistent obstacle to academic mobility and regional cooperation in Central Asia. Such consistent issues as visa regulations, short-term residence permits, and complex paperwork procedures as nostrification were repeatedly mentioned. In addition, the lack of mutual recognition of degrees and educational qualifications further limits student mobility in the region and minimizes the desire for further academic mobility.

Implementation of New Policies

Most participants emphasized the need to introduce new policies or reorganize academic mobility procedures to support student exchange and academic collaboration. For instance, proposals included increasing the number of regional scholarship programs, simplifying legal and administrative procedures and creating a unified Central Asian educational platform to centralize information and opportunities. In addition, Erasmus+ comparative models were often mentioned as examples of proper academic mobility models. According to the participants, this program will help to increase the mobility and cooperation of students, respectively.

Informal Regionalism and Cultural Proximity

Despite all the above-mentioned bureaucratic issues, the majority of students expressed optimism about academic cooperation. Many noted that cultural proximity, belonging to a single region and digital connectivity contribute to the creation of informal cross-border networks. These prospects indicate a growing interest in regionalism among the youth of Central Asia, although restrained by institutional problems in the region.

Perceptions of Kazakhstan and Identity Shifts

Identity Transformation and Integration Experiences

Students often reported changes in their self-perception and regional identity while studying in Kazakhstan. For the majority of participants, this experience has strengthened their sense of belonging to the broader Central Asian community. This emerging identity was often based on shared traditions, Islamic values, linguistic proximity, and cultural understanding. Participants' reflections on cultural closeness, including notions of a "one nation" identity, underscore the enduring relevance of a shared social space. Moreover, living in such an environment had a positive impact on building interethnic networking, which contributes to improving integration in the region.

However, it is important to note that since the experiences were different, some participants described feelings of alienation or linguistic discrimination. These cases have contributed to a more critical view of integration, revealing hidden contradictions between national identity and regional solidarity. Thus, a significant part of the participants deny the existence of integration, and believe that most countries cooperate in a competitive framework.

Kazakhstan as a Professional and Educational Destination

Nevertheless, most of the participants acknowledged that during their time in Kazakhstan, the participants were significantly influenced by their attitude towards Central Asian cooperation. Several students expressed interest in working or living in other Central Asian countries, especially in general sectors such as finance, law, or international

development. Others viewed Kazakhstan as a long-term destination because of the emotional and professional fit for building a career in the country or living there.

Conclusion

The results of the study show a complex form of regionalism in Central Asia, due to the interpersonal experience and cultural proximity of students, but this is not so visible in political terms. These results echo the broader theoretical framework of "social" regionalism, where shared identities sometimes outweigh formal political and economic integration (Costa Buranelli, 2021; Jetschke & Lenz, 2013).

The participants' reflections on cultural proximity, such as "one nation" self-awareness, validate the continuing presence of a shared social space. Individuals share this experience as well as demonstrate regional proximity including a common identity feeling. This kind of sense indicates a strong cultural ties and influences their perception of regionalism. Cultural and historical heritage continues to connect the regions, per Mayer (2021) and Isaacs and Poles (2015).

However, despite the cultural proximity promotes social cohesion, bureaucratic and administrative obstacles continue to hinder academic regional integration. Some students noticed difficulties such as obtaining a visa, lack of recognition of diplomas and difficulties in obtaining a residence permit. Although the interpersonal level reflects the growing regional identity, unresolved structural problems hinder its development.

From an educational perspective, students' openness to cross-border mobility is consistent with arguments of Starr (2024) and Amutuhaire (2024), which emphasize the role of education in promoting sustainable regional cooperation. However, academic exchanges are obstructed due to the lack of a regional mobility system similar to Erasmus+ (Costa Buranelli, 2021).

Political structures might adapt themselves to regionalism in a long-term perspective. Without such adaptation, the development of a shared regional identity may remain limited, as the existence of a social space does not necessarily translate into sustained political or economic cooperation. According to Högselius (2022), informal modes of integration, including infrastructural and technical cooperation, may still promote regional connectivity even without official institutional frameworks.

Given Kazakhstan's current role as the main host country for students from the CA, it occupies a unique position that contributes to the deepening of regional integration through education. This study demonstrates that, while official political discourse frequently

underscores the importance of regional integration, it is the everyday social interactions among youth that substantiate and operationalize this abstract notion.

Furthermore, educational mobility is vitally crucial when it shapes perceptions of regional unity, thus investments in student exchange programs as well as academic partnerships can reinforce regional cohesion.

The formation of regional identity may remain largely symbolic and socially constrained in the absence of corresponding shifts in institutional and political agency. Following that, voices of youth must be integrated within policy design toward sustainable regional integration. Therefore, to gain integration structural barriers must be addressed respectively.

The circle of participants was limited to students from Central Asia who study at universities located in Kazakhstan. Most of the students were recruited from large and internationally oriented universities in Kazakhstan, and these elite universities mainly attract academically motivated and open-minded students whose views may differ from those of other students attending non-elite educational institutions from small towns.

Future research could broaden its scope by including working youth and Central Asian students studying outside Kazakhstan to capture more diverse regional experiences. A mixed-methods or comparative approach may also offer deeper insights into how national contexts and social environments shape perceptions of integration. Furthermore, quantitative studies may be able to offer further generalizability as well as complement qualitative findings. By stressing all of the importance in perception, identity, and cultural proximity for shaping regional futures, this study contributes greatly to the growing field in constructivist and youth-centered research within international relations.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT in order to organize interview answers. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the final version of the diploma project.

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The EU Approach to Counter Foreign Digital Interference

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Abstract: The rising threat of foreign digital interference presented as a strategic and intentional use of digital tools, poses a significant threat to democratic principles. Threat actors are now able to interfere in another state's political processes, utilizing information manipulation techniques that may not be illegal by nature but are nonetheless harmful. These malicious activities can lead to substantial regional destabilization and disruptions. The European Union (EU) has emerged as a frontrunner in conceptualizing and institutionalizing countermeasures against these hybrid challenges. In particular, the joint efforts of the EU Commission's departments, particularly its diplomatic service, the European External Action Service (EEAS), have introduced proactive measures and frameworks aimed at fostering a common understanding of the danger and devising preventive measures. As part of this initiative, the EEAS has produced three comprehensive reports on the phenomenon of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI). This study examines the evolution of the EU's countermeasures, the exploration of its gradual progress in the articulation of key concepts, the institutional mechanisms, and the critical perspectives on the EU's approach. The study employs a thematic analysis of official policy documents, annual EEAS reports on FIMI, and academic literature to trace the shift from traditional cyber threats to complex, non-illegal forms of information manipulation. The findings outline the demand for ongoing enhancement of more punitive and systemic counter mechanisms stemming from the rapidly evolving state of FIMI, regardless of the EU's progress in building institutional resilience. The scrutiny concludes by reflecting on the implications of the EU's experience for other states, such as Kazakhstan, which face similar threats in the open information space.

Keywords: Foreign digital interference; European Union; Cyber threats; FIMI

Table of contents

Introduction

In recent years, a significant threat of foreign information interference has become an alarming concern affecting political processes across the globe. The actors can now more swiftly and intensely manipulate the information landscape of any targeted state. Such malicious interference is done through advertisements on social media, impersonated media outlets, and other deceitful audio-visual materials generated by Artificial Intelligence, among other tools.

The European Union, by establishing a structured framework known as Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) has taken a leading role in countering threats presented by the information landscape. For Kazakhstan, examining the experience of the EU could prove invaluable due to the presence of neighboring countries such as Russia and China, which are influential and active actors of FIMI. This situation necessitates Kazakh policymakers and academics to be mastered well in this topic.

The study begins by situating the issue within its broader context, tracing the historical and conceptual trajectory of cyber and digital threats. This then continues with the examination of EU policy sources and analysis of FIMI behaviors and techniques, with particular emphasis on the roles of Russia and China as key actors. Further, the overview of EU responses includes examination of institutional mechanisms, operational tools, and the official annual reports. The inquiry then shifts to the critical perspectives that scrutinizes the EU's approach by engaging with academic and policy critique. Finally, the discussion section synthesizes these findings, revisiting the broader implications of EU policy measures, the persistent challenges posed by the fluid and adaptive nature of FIMI, and the relevance of the EU's experience for other states, including Kazakhstan.

Context and Background

   1. Early age of cyber challenges

With the rise of technologies capable of disrupting operational systems, and destroying and corrupting important data, namely viruses, the cyber attack landscape has been rapidly evolving. The 1990s brought more and more complex viruses to the world, including the famous Chernobyl virus, also known as the CIH virus, which had the capability of damaging the very computer hardware (Kovalchuk, 2024). This enormous potential for damage via such cyber attacks attracted many cyber criminals. Over the years, malware techniques have been enriched with new tactics such as worms, trojans, and rootkits (Kovalchuk, 2024). These new

forms of malicious software became more sophisticated and difficult to detect. Rather than focusing solely on financial gain, many incidents of the 2000s took on political motivations, as evidenced by the notable Distributed Denial of Services (DDoS) attack on Estonia made by Russia in 2007 (Ottis, 2008). During these attacks, government portals, major banks, news outlets, and other critical infrastructures were under a series of attacks over a total of 22 days (Ottis, 2008). The discussion surrounding politically motivated cyber attacks must cover the following infamous cyber activities targeting Georgia in 2008, and the ongoing attacks on Ukraine that began in 2014 (Rashid et al., 2021). Later, these tactics have been employed to destabilise nations or to elect officials favourable to foreign actors. In this cyber landscape, Russia has been a predominant player, along with other state actors such as the US, China, India, Israel, and North Korea (Rashid et al., 2021). The similar trend of targeting high-profile infrastructures continued to be part of the well-known Stuxnet worm in 2010, which also has been used to target Iranian nuclear facilities. These types of attacks were seen as a cost-effective means of achieving political objectives without causing harm to innocent civilians (Farwell & Rohozinski, 2011). Conjointly, these incidents could illustrate how cyber attacks have evolved from initial broad-brush and disruptive to becoming more intricate and financially incentivized by state actors (Falowo et al., 2024).

2. **Evolution of cyber threats from hard threats to digital interference**

The Falowo et al. analysis revealed that approximately 86% of DDoS attacks over the decade beginning in 2013 were directed at strategically significant high-profile infrastructures capable of disrupting or incapacitating entire state entities, which could result in substantial economic losses for the state (2024). The same longitudinal study found noticeable spikes in DDoS and malware incidents in 2020 and 2022. As suggested by the authors, the initial increase could be attributed to the increased online activity during the COVID-19 pandemic period, while the following surge in 2022 could be due to technological advancement and the resulting exposure of vulnerabilities (Falowo et al., 2024). Alongside the spike in 2022, the Falowo et al. study outlines a significant dip in 2023, which could suggest an improvement in defensive measures against cyber attacks or the shift towards other forms of cyber/digital threats (2024). Hence, many actors may shift to utilize digital information manipulation tactics due to their non-illegal but potentially harmful nature, which presents a significant threat to political processes while being less financially demanding compared to traditional cyber assaults. With this shift, the evolution of cyber threats can be traced from being overtly harmful and illegal to the emergence of a more fluid category of digital threats, which this study particularly characterizes as foreign digital interference. While the concept of propaganda and information manipulation is not novel, the ability to digitally distort reality through cyber dissemination

techniques introduces an unfamiliar aspect to the recent threat (Van Niekerk, 2018).

3. Global reactions

Under these circumstances, the international community is expressing deep concerns about the rising digital challenges. Organizations, such as the United Nations and NATO, have been raising alarms about the growing complexity of digital threats, urging interstate cooperation and joint action to reinforce digital resilience at both national and global levels. The 78th session of the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on the *Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in the context of digital technologies,* which called upon member states to combine efforts "to share expertise, knowledge, and effective practices in addressing disinformation" (A/RES/78/213). Moreover, the UN is currently on the go of developing the *Code of Conduct for Information Integrity on Digital Platforms,* aimed at establishing a normative "gold standard" for the responsible use of digital platforms to mitigate threats stemming from mis- and disinformation, and hate speech, for the safeguard of human rights (The United Nations, 2023). Meanwhile, NATO has also acknowledged the challenge of information threats, response measures of which include a multitemporal approach based on four key functions: Understand, Prevent, Contain and Mitigate, and Recover, as well as the establishment of a NATO Cyber Security Centre (NATO, 2025). The strong concern of the global community with digital and cyber threats showcases the recognition of the intensifying impact of the problem, with the potential to undermine core values of democracy and jeopardize security and digital space integrity.

Similar concerns regarding foreign digital interference are shared on a state's level. France, for instance, has established a dedicated department for vigilance and protection against foreign digital interference, called VIGINUM (SGDSN, 2022). As part of France's response measures, they publish reports aimed at refining definitions and detection mechanisms with the help of multidisciplinary experts; the recent report focuses on a particular case of Romanian elections in 2024 (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2025). In 2018, Canada launched a similar initiative, known as the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism (G7 RRM), aiming to create common standardized tools to examine foreign information manipulation across the G7 (Canada, 2025). They also publish annual thematic reports starting from 2021. Comparable efforts are seen by the United States, exemplified by the State Department's R/FIMI office (Guo, 2025).

4. The EU as a frontrunner

The focus of the present thesis is precisely given to the European Union. The EU is widely regarded as a frontrunner in addressing FIMI, actively taking steps to confront the growing challenges since 2022. It is worth mentioning that the United States has also been using

this specific term of FIMI; specifically, the State Department has established the R/FIMI office, which was reorganized from the initial Global Engagement Center at the end of 2024, though the office was eliminated in April 2025 (Guo, 2025). Nonetheless, the EU succeeded in coining and institutionalizing the term of FIMI first. In particular, the European External Action Service (EEAS) – the EU's diplomatic service and foreign policy and security arm – has taken a leading role in this matter. Ever since the first call in 2015 from the Member States to address emerging disinformation campaigns from Russia, the EEAS has fortified its abilities to detect and respond to disinformation and digital interference threats (EEAS, 2025). Since 2023, the EEAS, specifically the division of Strategic Communications, has been annually reporting on FIMI, taking a notable part in conducting thorough analyses of FIMI incidents, as well as developing a structured, holistic approach to building resilience.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

This section outlines the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of our research. The nature of the phenomenon of digital interference relates to efforts to shape actor preferences and it necessarily requires cooperation involving state and non-state actors. Liberal institutional theory constitutes the basis of our theoretical framework. This research aims to understand how the EU is addressing a specific type of digital threat - foreign digital interference, which it identifies as Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference. As it can be seen, conceptual understanding is an essential part of our research. Hence, this section also articulates the conceptual framework of our work.

1. Theoretical framework

Outlining a theoretical framework is important in managing a large amount of information by excluding irrelevant data and, depending on the theory, articulating the perspective of the international system. The domain of International Relations (IR) highlights, though not limits to, the perspectives of three predominant classical schools of thought, namely realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Building on the historical patterns, major IR theories offer well-grounded explanations of global affairs dynamics. The establishment of dominant IR theories dates back centuries, and to avoid obsolescence and maintain their relevance, the theories adapt to ever-changing global conditions, incorporating new elements into the paradigm. Therefore, it is worth mentioning that the focus of the analysis is precisely given to the revised version of classical liberalism - liberal institutionalism.

The main tenet of liberal institutionalism suggests that the way towards peace, economic growth, and cooperation lies within global governance, seeing both domestic and international institutions as mediators and the main forces in the international system. (Baylis, 2008). Liberal

institutionalists argue that prosperity can be achieved through the so-called 'integrated communities' (Baylis, 2008). The idea of 'integrated communities' derives from the opportunity cost of independent states giving up some sovereignty in favor of shared goals. (Baylis, 2008) The EU is a primary example of a sui generis entity and integrated regional community, demonstrating that stability and progress can be achieved through institutional action, multilateral cooperation, and interconnectedness.

In this sense, the member states appear to be prioritizing an institutional approach in countering foreign interference. The EU's reliance on bodies, such as the EEAS, in managing digital challenges demonstrates its assertiveness in institution-based resilience. The EEAS in its reports heavily recommends and stands for a collaborative and "whole-of-society approach to tackling FIMI", which reflects hallmarks of liberal institutionalist thinking. (EEAS, 2023).

2. Conceptual framework

Due to the fluidic nature of the concepts, applying a conceptual framework is critical in this research in order to eliminate inappropriate interpretations and assumptions about the definitions and concepts. It is worth clarifying that this study focuses on the specific category of challenges rather than all digital challenges. Cyber threats present a wide range of misuse of digital technologies, including Artificial Intelligence (AI) risks, cyber attacks, malware, disinformation, etc. However, the major aspect of the work is centered around the concept of foreign digital *interference* and *information manipulation*. As stated in the second EEAS report, FIMI has a "stronger socio-cognitive component" which distinguishes it from the "technical dimension" of cyber (EEAS, 2024). This means that the previously described in the context and background section cyber-related domain is out of the scope of this analysis when referring to digital threats and/or digital challenges.

The study utilizes concepts that may have similar meanings to each other, however, it is important to differentiate between them. Therefore, within the framework of this research, *foreign digital interference* is described as an umbrella term that refers to any malicious use of digital tools, platforms, or technologies by foreign actors to interfere in another state's internal affairs. At the same time, *Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)* solely refers to the concept developed and used by the EEAS. According to the glossary from the EEAS reports, FIMI is identified by its

> "mostly non-illegal pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes; such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner, by state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory"

> (EEAS, 2025).

Thus, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks inform the readers of the study's boundaries, limiting it to the EU's institutional responses to the specific challenge of foreign information manipulation and interference.

Methodology

The research adopts an exploratory method, aiming to examine the new concept of foreign digital interference. Although the underlying phenomenon itself that the concept describes, such as disinformation, interference, and propaganda coming from foreign actors, has been a topic of public discourse for years, its current form as FIMI in the EU's official articulation is of very recent origin, as it has been in institutional use only since 2022. The type of 'prestudy' allows researchers to conduct a tentative analysis on emerging matters, helping to generalize an understanding of it. This method is particularly suitable for topics that are understudied and require further exploration (Swedberg, 2020). This is due to the fact that standard methodologies may prove impractical for examining emerging subject matters, as existing literature may not provide the necessary information needed for conducting traditional procedures. Given the study's focus, quite an unprecedented foreign digital interference concept, an exploratory method is found to be appropriate to be guided for this research.

The core of our scrutiny is the three comprehensive EEAS reports that are particularly focused on the FIMI concept. These reports conjointly offer a substantial amount of data, documenting all FIMI incidents from the end of 2022 to the end of 2024, with the most recent third report being published on March 19, 2025 (see Annex). The average length of each report is 39 pages. Primarily, these documents conceptualized FIMI, familiarizing the EU with it and facilitating its detection. Late efforts were centered on the development of the analytical tool called the FIMI Exposure Matrix. While predominantly working with these three reports, it is worth being aware of how EU institutions function. Each body represents different stakeholders: the EU Council reflects member states' interests, the Commission represents the EU as an organisation, and the Parliament speaks on behalf of the EU populace. We recognize that the EEAS, as part of the EU Commission, expresses the viewpoint of the EU as an organization. Due to the interconnected character of all EU institutions, this study will include relevant reports produced by these institutions. Beyond these official reports, our analysis incorporates academic literature that raises critical questions relevant to our study. The existing body of literature primarily focuses on assessing the effectiveness of EU policy measures, which allows us to employ a literature review method to identify recurring themes.

Thematic analysis will serve as a guiding framework for our study, enabling us to work with all the collected data effectively. One of the primary advantages of this method is its

flexibility, which is essential for exploring the dynamic topic of foreign digital interference. Its purpose extends beyond merely summarizing the data, as it seeks to analytically trace thematic pathways, allowing researchers to recognize overlapping pieces of information (Clarke & Braun, 2016). In particular, the study employs an inductive thematic analysis, where data is gathered from specific pieces of content—reports, in our case—to then derive broader generalizations (Alhojailan, 2012). Such a method enables researchers to keep all themes effectively connected to the available data. Hence, this method will be most relevant for our investigation due to the emergent nature of the subject, which requires initial exploration and explanation of the various information at hand. This brings us to the final stage of our study: interpretations. Owing to the flexible nature of the inductive analysis, there is a need for precise framings and explanations of main findings, and this is where interpretations become essential in any qualitative research (Alhojailan, 2012). Thus, the interpretative qualitative analysis, as the concluding subsection, will assist us in explaining and generalising the analytical observations made in the earlier stages. The discussion section will encapsulate all findings with interpretations of the main thematic patterns observed across annual reports and academic literature.

Main Findings

1. Conceptual clarity: A necessary element for designing the EU response to digital threats

While the very nature of foreign interference is far from being recent, such processes as globalization and digitization transform the dynamic in which it operates in the most groundbreaking ways (Dowling, 2021). The fluidity, along with the ever-changing character of the realm, challenges the EU with the development process of a singular understanding of what it is and how it should be addressed. Berzina and Soula (2020) brought to attention the conceptual issue of foreign interference, arguing that defining it comes with the risk of either being too broad, which might reflect on right-restrictive implications, or too narrow to cover specific and newly emerging forms of interference, hindering the effectiveness of the resilience. Authors also highlighted the lack of a unified consensus and clarity on the definitions within the Union and institutions, which might complicate and prolong the efforts of policymakers in establishing laws against the threat. (Berzina and Soula, 2020). Likewise, scholar James Pamment (2020) believed that the ambiguity in the definitions comes between a forceful defense, stating that "the EU and many of its affiliated bodies should adopt commonly held terms for discussing the challenges they face".

The uncertainty in the definitions can be seen in several examples. For instance, "disinformation" can often be used as a catchall term, creating confusion between different

degrees of interference. Both Pamment and the EEAS distinguish between "disinformation" and "misinformation", highlighting that each presents a different problem that requires tailored approaches in terms of their effectiveness and suitability (EEAS, 2023). To more clearly understand their difference, the former refers to "verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm", as stated in the first report (EEAS, 2023). Misinformation, on the other hand, is referred to as "false or misleading information shared without harmful intent, though the effects can be still harmful" (EEAS, 2023). Below, Table 1 illustrates key comparative characteristics between the definitions of "disinformation" and "misinformation" based on the EEAS's utterance. Thus, setting clarity in terms of intent and deliberateness is crucial when applying policy measures to align with the corresponding responsibilities of actions.

Feature	Disinformation	Misinformation
Nature of content	Verifiably false, misleading information	False, misleading, outdated information
Intent	Shared with the intent to manipulate the information environment and deceive the public	Shared without harmful intent; may result from ignorance or error
Spread	Deliberately coordinated spread (bots, inauthentic accounts)	Uncoordinated, accidental spread
Potential harm/ effect	Designed to cause harm (election interference, social division, threat to democratic political processes)	May have harmful effects, though with no intent (public confusion, weakened public trust)

Table 1. Comparative Characteristics of Disinformation and Misinformation. *Prepared by the authors based on EEAS reports.*

Similar logic can be attributed to the difference between terms of "interference" and "influence". The term "interference" by its definition implies one's unwanted involvement in the situation, carries a more negative connotation, and "should not be used to describe benevolent, benign, or neutral nation-state activity beyond its borders". (Berzina and Soula, 2020). The negative undertone of describing interference is often followed by additional adjectives, such as "malicious", "malign", "manipulative", and is especially noticed in the institutional discourse of the EU (Fridman, 2024). "Influence", on the other hand, "encompasses any type of interaction between two political actors – whether it is honest cooperation based on shared democratic values, or an act of war" (Fridman, 2024). This way, interference constitutes a part of a broader definition of influence and can be characterized by the perception of one's national power as conflicting with existing values and standards. (Fridman, 2024).

The fluidity of the foreign digital interference phenomenon is also evidenced by the EU's description of it as existing in a "gray zone/area" and being "non-illegal". This suggests activities that stay tolerated and do not cross the border of being explicitly unlawful yet still can pose a threat to political systems, undermine core values, and cause public harm. The specific articulation of foreign interference as being "non-illegal" behavior instead of just "illegal" covertly implies the existence of a blurred line between foreign influence and illegitimate manipulation in which the phenomenon operates (Ördén and Pamment, 2021).

1.1. Gradual articulation of the concepts of foreign interference and information manipulation

Given the mentioned nuances in establishing the approach towards conceptualization, the EU has undergone significant changes in how it describes and defines the threat it faces. The issue first entered the EU's political agenda and discourse in 2015, after the geopolitical shifts triggered by the annexation of Crimea. At the time, the terms "disinformation", "disinformation campaigns", and "propaganda" were most noticeable in the EU's official language to describe the ongoing events and address the problem, early references of which can be seen in the European Council conclusions of 2015 (European Council, 2015). For this reason, the communication team of East Strategic Communication Task Force, also known as EUvsDisinfo, was established by the EEAS, dedicated and targeted to fight specifically against the disinformation threats and propaganda coming from the eastern great power neighbour. (EUvsDisinfo, n.d.). Yet, the earliest observed detailed definition of disinformation was provided only in 2018 from the report by the Commission's High Level Expert Group (HLEG) on Fake News and Online Disinformation. According to their articulation, disinformation is referred to as "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit" (European Commission, 2018a). The report clearly stated the boundaries within which the term applies, excluding already illegal by the regulatory remedies online content, and deliberate but not misleading content, such as satires and parodies. (European Commission, 2018a). The same year, the definition was further elaborated by the European Commission's Communication, defining it as "verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm" (European Commission, 2018b). The Commission's interpretation of disinformation also "does not include reporting errors, satire and parody, or clearly identified partisan news and commentary" (European Commission, 2018b).

The EU's vocabulary continued to expand as the digital realm evolved, and in 2016 the concept "hybrid threats" emerged in the official language of the Commission, which encompasses a mixture of conventional and unconventional methods, such as cyberattacks, terrorism, disinformation etc, is used by state or non-state actors, includes coordinated, coercive and subversive behavior, pursues strategic goals while avoiding the triggering of a formal warfare (European Commission, 2016). This expansion of the concept beyond just disinformation can be explained by the need to adopt and respond to new and more sophisticated forms of danger, since the previous understanding no longer captures the scale and complexity.

However, the scope of the concept was then depicted as too broad to identify what exactly constitutes the malignant activity. For some time, the EU continued to utilize "disinformation" and "hybrid threats", which can be noticed in the 2018 Action Plan against Disinformation, until in 2020 the Commission in its European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) introduced the concepts of "foreign interference in the information space" and "information influence operation". According to the document, foreign interference is "often carried out as part of a broader hybrid operation, can be understood as coercive and deceptive efforts to disrupt the free formation and expression of individuals' political will by a foreign state actor or its agents". (European Commission, 2020). Whereas, information influence operation refers to "coordinated efforts by either domestic or foreign actors to influence a target audience using a range of deceptive means, including suppressing independent information sources in combination with disinformation." (European Commission, 2020). This shift toward a more precise understanding is not just semantic, but is a reflection of the EU's consolidation in its efforts to define and address the problem.

1.2. FIMI as the cornerstone of the EU toolbox to address foreign interference in the field of information space

As a part of attempting to set clear definitions, the EEAS in 2022 established the conceptual notion of what is now classified as foreign information manipulation and interference, or FIMI. The earliest institutional formulation of the concept as foreign information manipulation and interference appeared in March 2022 with the adoption by the EEAS of a long-term roadmap - the Strategic Compass for the Security and Defense. However, the document did not provide any definitions, but rather explained further actions for countermeasures to the threat. In February next year, the EEAS released its first report on FIMI, which was deliberately structured to provide a conceptual basis for the term.

As previously discussed in the conceptual framework, the definition of FIMI by the EEAS suggests non-illegal, manipulative, intentional, and coordinated activities by foreign state or non-state actors, aiming to undermine values, procedures, and political processes. (EEAS, 2023). The report suggested that the ABCDE framework, introduced by Pamment (2020), can serve as a criteria methodology for policymakers to distinguish between similar terms, assess, report, and design protective measures. Comprising five key components—Actor, Behavior, Content, Degree, and Effect—the framework deconstructs the problem into smaller elements, enabling a more comprehensive and structured approach to combat FIMI (EEAS, 2023). The ABCDE framework allows to more precisely define the involvement of a particular behavior to FIMI: whether the actor is of foreign or domestic origin, whether the behavior is coordinated and followed by malicious intent, the type of content that is being disseminated, its

reach, and political and societal effect (EEAS, 2023). Drawing on these criteria, it becomes possible to determine whether the actions observed can be qualified as attributed to FIMI.

2. Sources of the EU policy

Back in 2015, following the increased concern about Russia's disinformation campaigns on the Crimea annexation matter, the European Council conclusions highlighted the urgent need to challenge the growing problem, marking its very first steps in addressing the hybrid threat by establishing a communication team. (European Council, 2015). Consequently, the EUvsDisinfo was created as a flagship project of the EU's diplomatic service (EEAS), aiming to address, respond, and raise awareness of the information manipulation operations stemming from the Kremlin (EUvsDisinfo, n.d.).

Presented at the end of 2020, the European Commission introduced its European Democracy Action Plan, aimed at confronting challenges undermining democratic systems and building resilience among citizens (European Commission, 2020). The Action Plan laid out measures based on three pillars, one of them being *Countering Disinformation*. In particular, listed actions to countering disinformation included two key to this section points: (1) to "develop the EU toolbox for countering foreign interference and influence operations"; and (2) to "develop a common framework and methodology for collecting systematic evidence on foreign interference" (European Commission, 2020). Following as a response, in 2022, the EEAS published a Strategic Compass for Security and Defence that "sets out concrete actions - with clear deadlines to measure progress" (EEAS, 2022). By the year of 2030, the ambitious plan for strengthening the EU's security and defence policy demonstrated a commitment to four work strands: Act, Secure, Invest, Partner. As it was called for in the European Democracy Action Plan, the diplomatic service's Strategic Compass devotion, as part of the *Secure* strand, to "develop the EU toolbox to address and counter foreign information manipulation and interference", served as a soil for the establishment of the counter-mechanism in the form of the EEAS FIMI reports (EEAS, 2022).

2.1 Thematic analysis of the EEAS reports

The EEAS evidence-based reports serve as a blueprint for the so-called "*defender community*" - a wide range of diverse actors who try to unfold the nature of FIMI, identify its common trends, and build appropriate measures to counter it (EEAS, 2023). This section examines all three existing reports at this moment, tracing through the evolution points and providing an overview of their key elements, differences, and thematic overlaps.

Aspect	1st report (2023)	2nd report (2024)	3rd report (2025)
Scope	100 incidents	750 incidents	505 incidents
Threat origin countries	Russia, China	Russia, China, Iran	Russia, China
Key targets	Ukraine, EU, US	Ukraine, EU, NATO, NGOs	Ukraine, France, Germany, Africa, global events
Tactics, Techniques, Practices (TTPs)	Impersonation, images, multilingual ops	AI/deep fakes, election interference, networked campaigns	Bot networks, AI, inauthentic news, coordinated inauthentic behavior
Frameworks	Kill chain, DISARM, STIX	Four-phase response, FIMI-ISAC, election protocols	FIMI Exposure Matrix, network analysis
Response	Conceptual, foundation-laying	Standardized, operationalized	Regulatory, punitive, coordinated with allies

Table 2. Comparative analysis of the EEAS reports on FIMI. *Prepared by the authors based on EEAS reports.*

Table 2 demonstrates a comparative outlook of the three available report editions, divided into several categories: the scope of the FIMI, their main actors and targets, key tactics, techniques, and practices (TTPs) implemented, frameworks, and character of responsive measures introduced by the EEAS.

Over the period from 2023 to 2025, the reports have shown a clear advancement in the EU's approach to countering FIMI, building upon each other through a constructive dialogue and incrementally refining the understanding and proposed countermeasures to the threat. The advancement reflects both the sophistication of threat actors' TTPs and the institutional maturation of responses. For instance, serving as a pilot project, the first report laid a foundation for the defender community, sampling 100 FIMI incidents from late 2022, analyzing adversarial behavior and introducing conceptual frameworks, such as DISARM, Kill Chain, and STIX, which will be later detailed in the EU responses section. Whereas the latest report of 2025 demonstrates vivid progression, significantly expanding the scale of detected incidents, operationalizing the frameworks and moving towards regulatory and punitive measures, such as sanctions imposing and predictive infrastructure mapping through the introduced FIMI Exposure Matrix. Nevertheless, all three reports meet in identifying China and, in particular, Russia, as the primary FIMI actors, and Ukraine as the continuous target.

2.2. Challenges faced by the EU

First and foremost, democracy stands at the heart of the EU's values, along with the rule of law and fundamental human rights (European Commission, 2020). Both the global

community and the EU are deeply disturbed by the threat that disinformation and information manipulation pose to democratic societies. Democracy significantly relies on a free and open digital environment, places a strong value for information integrity, and upholds freedom of expression (European Commission, 2020). However, the very freedoms of expression and open information space are now being misused by foreign actors for public opinion manipulation and reality distortion, increasing the risks of society destabilization and fueling polarization. Over the last decade, the EU has reportedly been facing multiple ongoing disinformation campaigns of pro-Kremlin views. As mentioned earlier, the starting point of such deliberate and coordinated spread of falsifiable information can be traced back to the events of 2014, in particular, Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula. Ever since, the EU has been actively making efforts to address the issue and protect the core values the Union strongly commits to.

At the same time, misuse of open information space and freedom of speech comes with implications for the backbone of democracy - free and fair electoral processes. The earlier and most prominent incident of foreign digital interference dates back to the U.S. Presidential elections in 2016. The case was reported by the U.S. Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA), which confirmed Russia's involvement in its elections influence campaign through the government-supported troll farm - Internet Research Agency (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017). This incident served as a wake-up call for liberal democracies, especially for the EU, which became "keenly sensitive to any extra-regional entities attempting to influence unrest and poll interference" (Petek, 2025).

The first notable case of foreign digital interference within the borders of EU member states can be linked to the final round of the 2017 Presidential elections in France. The operation aimed at Presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron resulted in the so-called "Macron Leaks", where a large-scale of stolen internal campaign data, combined with real and altered emails and documents of Macron's team, were released online (Conley and Jeangène Vilmer, 2018). French scholar Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer in his detailed report claims that the operation had three distinct dimensions, notably, the disinformation campaign, the hack, and the leak, where no single actor was behind. However, the two main sources of the anti-Macron propaganda were attributed to the Kremlin media (Russia Today and Sputnik) and the American alt-right (Jeangène Vilmer, 2019). The aftermath of the incident led to the adoption of the EU initiatives, such as the Action Plan against Disinformation in 2018, which addressed concerns for the upcoming 2019 European Parliament elections, and called for response actions to strengthen resilience towards disinformation. (EEAS, 2018).

Despite the efforts to combat the threat, instances of foreign digital interference continued to occur. One of the most recent cases involved the Romanian 2024-2025 Presidential

elections, which resulted in the annulment of the first round of elections due to accusations of flawed electoral processes. The pro-Russian candidate, Călin Georgescu, became a frontrunner in the votes "due to a complex strategy of information manipulation" (Stanescu, 2024). Later revealed by the Supreme Court of National Defense (CSAT), vote rigging and sophisticated illegal media campaigns were backed by Russian financial support to foster societal division. (Stanescu, 2024).

The latest EEAS report of 2025 exposed elements of long-term operations, such as Doppelgänger, Portal Kombat, False Façade, and the African Initiative, which altogether constitute a part of a vast and sophisticated FIMI ecosystem. The campaigns are primarily attributed to Russia, where each is aimed at expanding the Russian narrative, discrediting Ukraine, interfering in Western politics, and undermining democracy, using tactics such as impersonation and paid influencer promotion. (EEAS, 2025).

2.3. Evolution of FIMI behaviors and techniques

This section will explore the evolution of FIMI based on the annual reports published by the EEAS. Prior to deeper examination, it is first important to clarify the term of Tactics, Techniques and Procedures, as specifically articulated by the EEAS:

> *TTP(s) In the context of FIMI, "Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures" are patterns of behaviour used by threat actors to manipulate the information environment with the intention to deceive. "Tactics" are the operational goals that threat actors are trying to accomplish. "Techniques" are actions through which they try to accomplish them. "Procedures" are the specific combination of techniques across multiple tactics (or stages of an attack) that indicate intent and may be unique for different threat actors.*

<div align="right">(EEAS, 2023)</div>

The distinction between illegal cyber attacks and malicious FIMI activities will become clearer as we delve into exploring the exact techniques and procedures involved.

TTPs Category	2023 EEAS Report	2024 EEAS Report	2025 EEAS Report
Impersonation	Mimicking trusted media outlets	Sophisticated impersonation of individuals and organizations	Fake news ecosystems with 124 incidents recorded
Bot networks	No mention	No mention	Often disposable botnets across 38,000+ channels
Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB)	Cross-posting among inauthentic accounts	Systematic cross-platform campaigns	Systematic cross-platform campaigns
Localization	30 languages used	Still present, but was not explicitly discussed	349 incidents of tailored messages via local references
Artificial Intelligence	Image/video manipulation	Deepfakes	41 cases of deepfakes and other AI manipulations
Election interference	No mention	Infrastructure preparation, information laundering, CIB (Spain, Poland, 2023 elections)	42 cases detected during 2024 European Elections
Content formats	Images, videos, memes, infographics, and articles	Video campaigns, manipulated speeches	AI audio, deepfake video, and fake websites
Evasion	Use of diplomatic channels and limited encryption	Use of encrypted messaging apps (Telegram)	Disposable CIB accounts
Notable examples (see Annex)	Impersonated media outlets, such as, the French Charlie Hebdo, German Titanic and Spanish El Jueves	Polish and Spanish election interferences	FIMI operations such as the Doppelgänger, Portal Kombat and other campaigns targeting key events in 2024

Table 3. Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs) trends by category in EEAS reports. *Prepared by the authors based on EEAS reports.*

Table 3 shows that in the EEAS's debut report on FIMI, it was identified that the most prevalent content formats were image/video-based, with minimal use of articles on impersonated media outlets (EEAS, 2023). To deliver fabricated content, actors relied on cross-posting content on different social media platforms. Markedly, Russia frequently employed official communication channels (76 channels out of 207) such as diplomatic service accounts (EEAS, 2023). This tendency could be attributed to the sanctioning of popular state-controlled channels within the EU. Moreover, since the end of 2022, FIMI actors have been mindful of localizing content, with the first report revealing the use of 30 languages across 100 incidents (EEAS, 2023). These outlined two primary objectives of TTPs are to distract and distort,

especially when covering topics of "Russian invasion of Ukraine" and "Energy crisis" (EEAS, 2023).

In the following report, there is a traced trend of increased FIMI attacks directed at different European and international organizations, along with non-political individuals. Media organizations were likely to be targeted through sophisticated impersonation techniques that add credibility to inauthentic content. There is also one predominant technique that was given a name in this report. The Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB) describes the use of networks of accounts to spread particular messages across various platforms while concealing their true nature (EEAS, 2025). Although this term was introduced in the glossary of the last third report, this technique has been consistent across all three reports. The application of enhanced AI tools was noticed in several FIMI cases, particularly Deepfake technology, which is usually employed to create manipulated videos for the impersonation of some individuals. However, the EEAS claims that the use of AI in 2023 showcases an evolution rather than a revolution (EEAS, 2024).

The latest report has outlined the significant trend in enhanced localization techniques, with recorded 349 occurrences in 2024. This technique of maliciously tailoring content to align with the target audience's habits and context builds up credibility. Tailoring information manipulation to specific historical and cultural contexts has now been integrated into the existing toolkit that was previously predominantly utilizing local languages. This shift was also accompanied with lessened Western support for Ukraine (EEAS, 2025). Additionally, there has been an increase in the use of disposable botnets, with CIB accounting for 73% of all recorded channels. This can be confidently stated that CIB has become a prominent aspect of FIMI activities, continuously evolving to be more and more systemic. While AI usage is gradually rising, it still constitutes a relatively small part of all FIMI activity and is usually applied for the creation of Deepfake audio and video content (EEAS, 2025).

Cross-platform coordination, a simultaneous use of different platforms, is found to be a recurring technique, with the first explicit identification of it in the second report as the "default modus operandi" (EEAS, 2024). This character has been persistent in the last report, illustrating the distribution of channels across various social media platforms (EEAS, 2025). Certain platforms are often utilized due to the possibility to easily create disposable accounts or, depending on the target audience's preferences, particular platforms can dominate in specific FIMI incidents, as evidenced by the predominant use of Facebook in targeting African countries (EEAS, 2025). This also points to another significant characteristic that has evolved over time: content adaptability and formatting. These advancements may imply a progression in the

strategic planning of FIMI, increasing sophistication, thereby increasing the perceived trustworthiness.

Overall, the foundation of the TTPs remains consistent, and the rise in usage of AI has enabled actors to scale their activities significantly. However, as it has been noted by the EEAS, AI has also a potential to benefit the defender community as well as the attackers (EEAS, 2024). The general pace of evolution is rapid, with increased reach of FIMI attacks onto other states such as the Middle East, Asia, and African countries. This gradual yet progressive sophistication helps actors to achieve their objectives more effectively, necessitating an enhancement in defence mechanisms.

2.4. Key actors: Russia and China
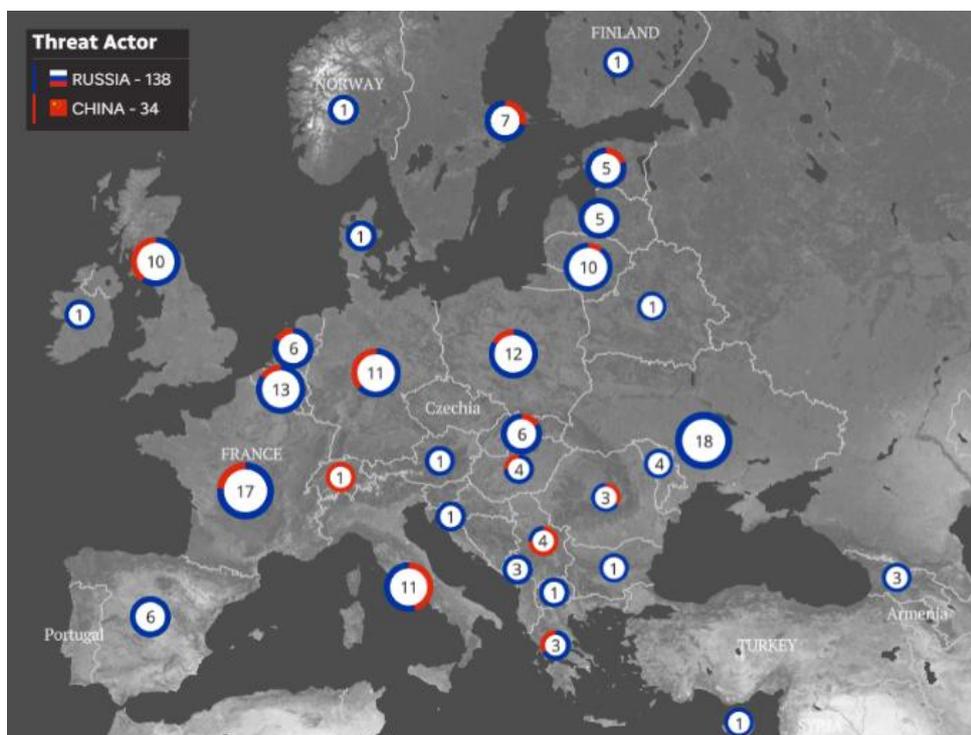
Figure 1. The number of foreign information manipulation incidents in Europe from 2014 to 2025

Source: Authoritarian Interference Tracker; The Alliance for Securing Democracy.

As mentioned earlier, the EEAS reports underscore that the origin of foreign digital interference primarily comes from two state actors - Russia and China, with the first being more frequent. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution and intensity of foreign information manipulation across the European mainland between 2014 and 2025, with a total number of 172 incidents, 138 of which are attributed to Russia and 34 to China, based on the data provided by the Authoritarian Interference Tracker.
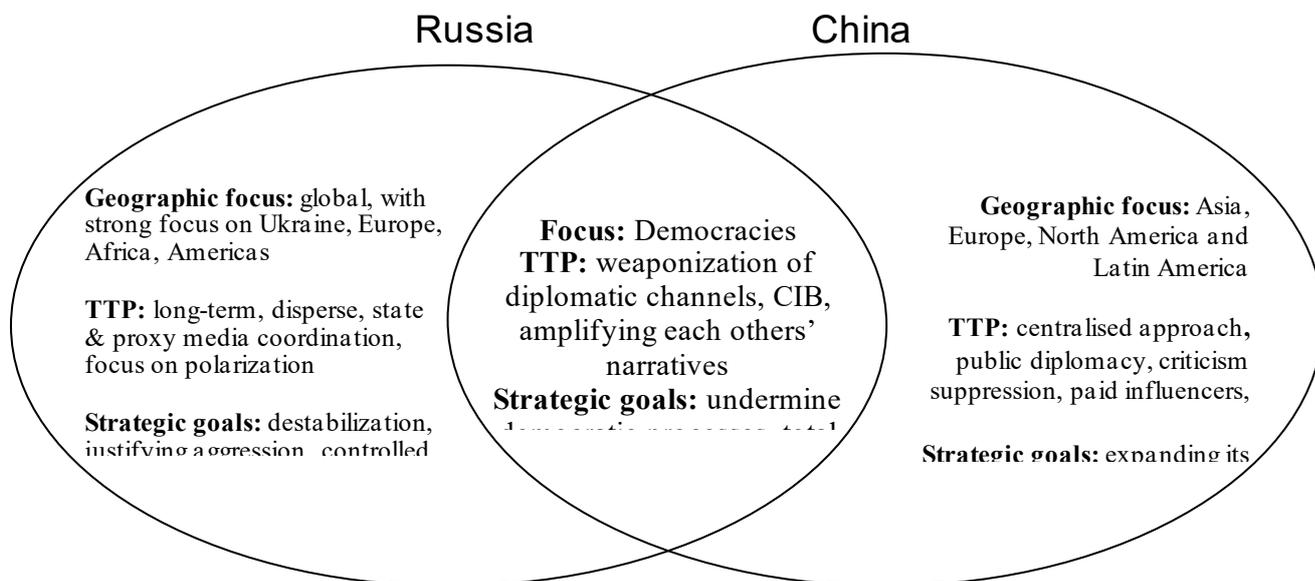
Figure   2.   Comparison   of   key   FIMI   actors
Prepared by the authors based on EEAS reports.

The third report has also indicated Russia to be the most frequent FIMI actor, specifically within the EU member states. Russian attributed infrastructures, which include all channels where connections to the actor are not concealed, account for 20% of total FIMI activity, while China encompasses 3.5% (EEAS, 2025).

While these two actors have aligned some of their FIMI campaigns and exhibit some common patterns of action and strategic goals, their coordination primarily remained opportunistic across all three reports. As illustrated in Figure 2, differences exist in their tactics and approach to FIMI. China is characterized by its centralized and synchronized infrastructure that targets defined objectives and topics, whereas Russia adopts more of a polycentric method, simultaneously addressing various countries and topics (EEAS, 2025). The general stance of China on foreign information manipulation is centered around specific and highly sensitive topics, namely dealing with conflicted regions like the South China Sea, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong (EEAS,2025). The main objective of these efforts is to reshape global perceptions and expand its political and economic influence.

Russia, on the other hand, tends to take advantage of every opportunity presented by important events, such as elections or some statements of high profile individuals. Such events often trigger Russia's swift efforts to distract or distort the targeted audience's perceptions, allowing it to destabilize political processes or justify its ongoing war in Ukraine. Hence, its strategy includes a wide range of misinformation, specifically tailored and adapted to various

scenarios, with their bigger scope focused on polarizing opinions in targeted regions rather than merely expanding its influence (EEAS, 2025).

Nonetheless, there are some notable amplification and mutual coordination efforts between these two actors, particularly when reinforcing anti-Western narratives. They both portray the West usually as weak and unstable, with NATO being blamed for the conflict escalation following the 1000 days since the start of the invasion of Ukraine (EEAS, 2025). Despite the above mentioned differences in tactics and approaches, their overarching core goals often closely align.

There are similar tactics employed by these two actors, as both utilize channels that could serve different roles depending on the levels that they operate: high influence hubs, boosters, and bridges between clusters. The high influence hubs are usually state controlled media outlets that generate large volumes of content, which are then spread by boosters across all channels, and further amplified by bridgers, that enlarge its global reach by sharing content in the languages of the targeted audiences (e.g., Sputnik Afrique, Pravda in English)(EEAS, 2025)

3. EU mechanisms and instruments to counter FIMI

To understand the emergence of the EU's countermeasures landscape, it is necessary to outline its diplomatic service body, the European External Action Service. This body addresses a wide variety of issues ranging from public diplomacy and crisis responses, with one of their focuses being tackling disinformation and FIMI. Development of response capabilities to disinformation primarily began in 2015 (Information Integrity and Countering FIMI, 2025). As previously mentioned, it has established a variety of mechanisms to define, detect, coordinate and respond to disinformation.

Earlier actions include the Rapid Alert System (RAS), launched in March 2019. This real time information sharing and monitoring system enables EU member states to share FIMI instances, which then raises awareness and provides coordinated responses across the union (Factsheet: Rapid Alert System, 2019). The system's benefits extend as a valuable data collection tool for researchers to analyse, track, and develop further response measures (see Annex).

In spring 2023, the creation of the Information Sharing and Analysis Centre (FIMI-ISAC) further strengthened the overall toolkit of the EU (see Annex). This initiative is a collaboration among like minded organizations that are interested in detecting, identifying malicious information manipulation behaviors (FIMI-ISAC, 2023). This promotes and

coordinates cohesive defence measures through the knowledge exchange and joint efforts by FIMI experts.

Tool	Purpose	Developed by	When	Response Measures	Application in EEAS / EU
Kill Chain	Model describing sequential stages to detect and disrupt	US military doctrine, Lockheed Martin (cyber)	Military- pre-2010s Cyber-2011 FIMI-2020s	Early detection and disruption at each stage	Understand FIMI campaign lifecycle; guides timing and targeting of countermeasures
DISARM	Framework for cataloguing, analyzing, and coordinating responses	DISARM Foundation and partners	~2022	Structured incident analysis, shared taxonomy, data exchange (STIX)	Adopted by EEAS, NATO, US; supports Rapid Alert System and ISAC
FIMI Toolbox	Comprehensive catalogue of instruments to prevent, detect, and respond	EEAS, EU institutions	Developed post-2022 (Strategic Compass)	Four pillars: Situational Awareness, Resilience Building, Disruption & Regulation, External Action.	Central operational framework for EU. Integrates short, medium, and long-term measures
FIMI Exposure Matrix	Analytical tool to systematically classify/attribute FIMI infrastructure	EEAS (Strategic Communications Division)	2025 (3rd EEAS FIMI Report)	Mapping infrastructure network analysis, enhanced attribution, targeted disruption	Supports identification and attribution of FIMI actors

Table 4. Overview of EEAS recommended responses.

Prepared by the authors based on EEAS reports.

The main focus of our study, the annual EEAS reports on FIMI, can be seen as a response mechanism itself, formulating response measures and recommendations. The first two reports particularly address the need for common definitions and terminology related to FIMI, introducing a framework for knowledge generation and information sharing. The pioneering report has introduced several response measures aimed at better understanding, detecting and disrupting FIMI activities, namely through the Kill Chain model. Originally utilized in the military and cybersecurity sphere, this very model can ideally be integrated to the FIMI landscape by allowing for a clear examination of each incident in sequential stages: planning, preparing, and executing to assessing (EEAS, 2023). This model offers the most optimal taxonomy for the Disinformation Analysis and Risk Management (DISARM) framework

introduced in the report, which is an open source framework for cataloging and analysing FIMI (EEAS, 2023). Along with this, the second report developed a crucial EU toolbox of joint responses that integrates analytical and response cycles to ensure more proportional and effective responses to counter FIMI. These initial reports served as foundational elements for the further punitive and specific response measures; they laid the baseline for tools that can refine and enhance counter mechanisms.

The initial efforts to construct the necessary framework were exemplified by the second report's contribution. It built upon the first report's FIMI framework that began with the Threat Analysis cycle, by subsequently expanding to include the Response cycle in the following report (EEAS, 2024). This workflow includes assessing threats, creating and developing countermeasures, and evaluating their effectiveness. The authors highlight the importance of continuous information sharing between the two workflows to create a systemic organization of the response arsenal (EEAS, 2024). The framework proposed in the second report consists of several important pillars: Cross-Domain Analysis, Adapted Countermeasures, and Mechanisms for Collective Response (EEAS, 2024). The first one emphasises information gathering that goes beyond technological aspects due to the socio-cognitive component of FIMI. Meaning, both types of data–the behavioral analysis of TTPs and the non-technical contextual indicators- inform the overall response strategy (EEAS, 2024). Meanwhile, the adapted countermeasures meet the need for preventive and long-term responses by developing a list of counter-activities for each stage: pre-incident, mid-incident, and post-incident (EEAS, 2024).

As noted in earlier sections, the latest report offers stricter and more punitive measures to the defender community through the systematic analytical tool known as the FIMI Exposure Matrix. The matrix incorporates sophisticated attribution methodologies that consider both behavioral indicators (posting times, language use, TTPs) and technical (IP addresses, hosting data). This tool enables the defender community to recognize the complexities around linking FIMI activities to threat actors, since there is a high risk of falling for over-attribution because some narratives could explicitly benefit particular actors (EEAS, 2025). Hence, the criterias for attribution proposed by the matrix entail a thorough comparison of indicators with previously detected profiles of adversaries, aiming to identify specific 'signatures' linked to them. Despite the strong analytical and evidence-based approach, the public attribution remains a political decision (EEAS, 2025). Acknowledging the potential diplomatic consequences, it is crucial to further advance attribution methodologies and to enhance the available knowledge of threat actors, while remaining open to the possibilities of unexpected parties getting involved.

These efforts, combined, underscore the importance of EEAS's role within the FIMI landscape by offering insights that could be then transferred to other targeted states.

4. Critical perspectives on the EU approach

This subsection engages with several critical perspectives which stem from the EU's approach to counter foreign digital interference, as highlighted in scholarly literature. The report by SG Strat (2024), for instance, offers an overview of the EU's efforts by focusing on activities done by EEAS in 2023. Another comprehensive report for 2024 by Gehringer (2024) explores in greater detail several measures that include: the Digital Services Act (DSA), the Code of Practice on Disinformation (CoPD), and initiatives such as EUvsDisinfo and the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO).

Colliver (2020) introduces an empirical examination of the primary pioneering document focusing on the 2019 European Parliament elections. The author highlights the need for enhancing transparency by adopting one model that will enable research and the expert community to freely observe the online environment. According to the author, the self-regulatory nature of the document is not enough; from their perspective, the code was rather a preliminary effort to build common grounds with Big Tech companies. With the subsequent strengthening of the CoPD in 2022, a study was implemented to compare the two versions and their effect, with no significant improvement in the misinformation ecosystem observed (Papadogiannakis et al., 2024). Authors also note the limitation caused by relatively few signatories adopting the CoPD; however, rather than criticizing it, they view it as a reflection of a desire for a misinformation-free online space.

Following this, Shattock (2021) provides additional analytical perspectives to look at the CoPD alongside other policy measures. The author argues that the era of self-regulatory measures in the misinformation landscape has come to an end, especially with the introduction of a binding legal framework - DSA. However, Shattock formulates several criticisms regarding the EU policy approach. In particular, he outlines several details that DSA overlooked, namely the issue of "harmful but lawful" content, which presents challenges in balancing legal regulation with freedom of expression. Conjointly, the literature outlines the limitations of these policies with Shattock (2021) labeling it a 'piecemeal' approach, while other authors echo such sentiments, acknowledging the progress.

Discussion and Conclusions

The digital landscape has evolved significantly over the years, capturing shifts from

early technical dimensions of cyber attacks, viruses and malware, to what is now taking the form of digital interference and information manipulation. It has become easier for state and non-state actors to take advantage of the gray zone factor, in which the threat exists. Without resorting to conventional and kinetic acts of conflict, threat actors can conduct attempts of malicious, intended, and coordinated actions to cause potential harm to political systems and societies, and undermine their core values and principles. Digital threats have become a fixed feature of global politics, where they are no longer occasional or exceptional, but a constant part of international affairs. Operating in a complex non-tangible environment, the problem is causing deep concerns for the global community, both states, international and regional organizations to address it.

Despite the absence of borders in the digital space, as well as the acknowledgment of the threat by the international community and cooperation, states adopt their own countermeasures, which reflects the nuances in how they perceive and address foreign digital interference. The EU is seen emerging as a significant and influential actor, not only in agenda and norms setting, but also in the conceptual shaping of the phenomenon, which can be seen through the institutional leadership of the EEAS.

Observed in the reports rapid evolution of the digital domain and the advancement of manipulation techniques used by the adversaries, from early situational cases of disinformation campaigns and narrative seeding, threat actors have significantly sophisticated their arsenals to whole infrastructures, within a spare of three years, making it challenging to establish clear definitions of what constitutes FIMI and how it should be addressed. Conceptualization of the phenomenon comes with the risk of either being too broad or too narrow, which can be seen through the development process of the EU's articulation.

The EU's efforts, in particular within the EEAS reports spectrum, provide scrutiny for the policymakers and defender communities in addressing the ever-changing global threat. Through its comprehensive and structured analysis of detected FIMI incidents and proposed countermeasures, it offers valuable lessons for other regions as well. The reports depict Russia and China as being the main origins of FIMI actions, targeting democracies in their objective to spread their narratives. In this sense, the importance of this study for Kazakhstan is particularly highlighted. Given the strategic geopolitical location of Kazakhstan, it is surrounded by two major powers and active actors of FIMI - Russia and China. The relative openness of Kazakhstan in the digital and information space is endangered by the risk of being interfered with, which proves the relevance of the topic for policymakers and academic researchers.

While this research mostly focused on the analysis of the EU's approach to countering foreign digital interference, further studies could explore how its conceptual framework and toolbox can be practically implemented and adopted in the context of Kazakhstan, offering insights upon the effectiveness of such approaches outside the EU.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used "Perplexity", "Elicit", and "Grammarly" in order to build the structure of sentences, search for literature and categorize, and correct grammatical and punctual mistakes. After using these tools/services, the authors reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the final version of the diploma project.

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Student Papers

US–EU Relations under Trump 2.0: Between Rhetoric and Reality

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Introduction: The transatlantic relationship between the United States and Europe has long been considered a cornerstone of the international liberal order. Although recent years—particularly under the Trump and now Trump-Vance administrations—have introduced new strains, the alliance remains fundamentally strong. A clear example of this tension emerged at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, where U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance publicly stated that the United States should "step back" from its security commitments to Europe—prompting widespread debate over the future of transatlantic relations.. While the comment made headlines and threw some in Europe into a momentary panic, closer inspection into the Vice President's motives indicated that the comment was specifically intended for the domestic political audience, and said nothing about a radical shift in US foreign policy. In fact, the alliance is strengthening in tangible terms marked by military coordination, economic alignment and joint diplomatic initiatives.

Introduction

The transatlantic relationship between the United States and Europe has long been considered a cornerstone of the international liberal order. Although recent years—particularly under the Trump and now Trump-Vance administrations—have introduced new strains, the alliance remains fundamentally strong. A clear example of this tension emerged at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, where U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance publicly stated that the United States should "step back" from its security commitments to Europe—prompting widespread debate over the future of transatlantic relations.. While the comment made headlines and threw some in Europe into a momentary panic, closer inspection into the Vice President's motives indicated that the comment was specifically intended for the domestic political audience, and said nothing about a radical shift in US foreign policy. In fact, the alliance is strengthening in tangible terms marked by military coordination, economic alignment and joint diplomatic initiatives.

This paper argues that rather than drifting apart, the US-Europe relationship is evolving in response to both global uncertainties and domestic political shifts.. Using realist, liberal and constructivist theoretical frameworks this paper discusses how strategic interdependence, economic integration, cultural values and civilizational identity bind the transatlantic alliance. Given its security cooperation, institutional persistence, and shared ideological commitments, the transatlantic alliance is still alive and well and continues to adapt and grow in the face of new uncertainties globally.

The purpose of this research is to explore the evolving nature of this relationship and why it remains strong despite actual frictions. The scope of analysis includes political, economic, strategic, ideological and civilizational dimensions of the alliance, looking at recent developments under the Trump-Vance administration, after Russia's aggression in Eastern Europe and the strategic competition with China. The main argument of this paper is that the transatlantic partnership is resilient and will be reformed, not fractured, in response to the current challenges.

Alongside its global relevance, this research report offers practical insights for regions like Central Asia, where designing effective institutions and forming strategic partnerships are becoming more important due to rising geopolitical uncertainty.

Analytical and Methodological Framework

This analysis encompasses the political, economic, strategic, ideological, and civilizational dimensions of the alliance between Europe and the United States. In this document, we utilize three leading theories in international relations-realism, liberalism, and constructivism- to explore the reasons behind the persistent bond between Europe and the United States, even in light of political discord and evolving global power landscapes.

This study adopts a qualitative research design, rooted in theoretical interpretation and comparative case study analysis, to examine the evolving nature of the U.S. - Europe alliance across five key dimensions: political, economic, strategic, ideological, and civilizational. The time frame of analysis spans from 2022 to 2025, a period marked by renewed geopolitical tensions, such as the Russia - Ukraine war, strategic competition with China, and shifting dynamics within Western democracies.

To analyze the **political dimension**, the research examines leadership discourses, public opinion surveys, and official policy statements from both the U.S. and European governments. Political speeches, such as those delivered at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, are subjected to discourse analysis to evaluate how political narratives shape perceptions of alliance strength and purpose.

The **economic dimension** is assessed through the study of EU–U.S. trade relations, investment flows, and interdependence mechanisms. Key events - such as retaliatory tariff policies and transatlantic economic dialogues-are analyzed to understand how economic ties both reinforce and test the resilience of the partnership. Institutional reports and economic agreements serve as primary materials in this area.

To address the **strategic dimension**, the research focuses on military cooperation and shared security challenges. Case studies of NATO-led operations such as "Steadfast Defender" and "Eagle Shield" are used to evaluate strategic alignment, defense burden-sharing, and deterrence behavior. Sources include NATO strategy documents, defense white papers, and statements from military officials.

The **ideological** aspect of the alliance is explored through the lens of liberal institutionalism. The research evaluates the continued relevance of democratic governance, human rights, and rule-of-law commitments as ideological pillars of the alliance. This includes an analysis of internal EU-U.S. political tensions and how they are mediated through institutional mechanisms like NATO and the OECD.

Finally, the **civilizational dimension** is investigated using constructivist approaches. This involves examining how cultural and historical narratives -such as the notion of "the

West"- reinforce a shared transatlantic identity. Drawing on the work of Alexander Wendt and others, the research analyzes public discourse, elite commentary, and cultural symbolism that shape perceptions of belonging to a common Western community.

The theoretical framework integrates realism (strategic threat balancing), liberalism (institutional and economic interdependence), and constructivism (shared identity and norms) to provide a holistic explanation of the alliance's resilience. These theories guided both the selection of sources and the analytical approach.

Data collection relies primarily on secondary sources, including scholarly works by Walt, Mearsheimer, Keohane, Ikenberry, and Wendt, along with official documents from NATO, the European Union, and the U.S. government. Media coverage and public opinion polls offer discursive and societal perspectives, while policy speeches provide insight into elite-level framing.

The analysis employs both discourse analysis -to interpret political and ideological narratives- and thematic analysis -to identify patterns across the five core dimensions. A comparative perspective is maintained to trace how the alliance adapts in the face of changing global and domestic contexts.

This multi-dimensional, theory-driven approach enables a nuanced understanding of why the transatlantic alliance continues to hold despite profound challenges. By mapping each analytical step to a core dimension of the alliance, the methodology directly supports the paper's central argument: that the U.S.-Europe relationship is not dissolving but recalibrating in response to contemporary global dynamics.

Literature Review and Policy Context

This paper adopts a comprehensive analytical framework that synthesizes the core assumptions of three major schools in international relations theory: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Together, these frameworks offer a multidimensional explanation of the enduring nature of the U.S.-Europe alliance.

From a realist perspective, the transatlantic alliance is understood as a strategic necessity in an anarchic international system, where states seek to maximize their security. As Waltz (1979) argues, alliances form as rational responses to external threats. The resurgence of Russian aggression, the strategic rise of China, cyber and hybrid warfare, and instability in regions like the Middle East all serve as shared threats that drive the U.S. and Europe to align their security efforts. Mearsheimer's (2001) offensive realism further explains U.S. calls for

burden-sharing and Europe's rising defense spending as mechanisms of power balancing aimed at deterring adversaries and maintaining geopolitical advantage.

Liberalism, by contrast, emphasizes how institutional frameworks and economic interdependence sustain cooperation even during periods of political tension. According to Keohane (1984), institutions reduce transaction costs, increase transparency, and provide mechanisms for conflict resolution. Despite transatlantic disagreements, mechanisms like NATO, the WTO, and the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council continue to function effectively. Economically, the U.S. and EU are each other's largest trade and investment partners (European Commission, 2024), and their mutual interdependence generates incentives for compromise and sustained collaboration-even amid tariff disputes (European Commission, 2025).

Constructivism offers a complementary explanation by focusing on shared identity, values, and civilizational narratives. As Wendt (1999) suggests, state behavior is shaped not only by material interests but by socially constructed norms and identities. The U.S. and Europe perceive themselves as part of a broader "Western" community rooted in liberal democracy, human rights, and Enlightenment values (Risse, 2010). This shared ideational framework contributes to alliance cohesion beyond material calculations and institutional linkages.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a robust basis for analyzing the alliance's resilience. By integrating strategic balancing, institutional durability, economic ties, and civilizational identity, the paper advances the argument that the U.S.- Europe relationship remains strong not in spite of challenges, but precisely because of its deep structural, normative, and functional foundations.

Main Findings

Findings vary across five critical dimensions: political coordination, economic interdependence, security cooperation, ideological and cultural alignment.

1. **Political dimension**

European governments, even those led by nationalist or populist parties, have largely sought to connect with Washington. In the United States, bipartisan majorities in Congress still support NATO. In 2025 Congress passed a joint resolution reaffirming the United States' commitment to Article 5 and passed funding to increasing funding for NATO operations in Eastern Europe (Meeks et al., 2025).

2. **Economic dimension**

The economic relationship between the European Union and the United States remains one of the cornerstones of the alliance. Economically, this cooperation is underpinned by high defense budgets and the transatlantic trade links, which bring finance for and strategic support to these military activities. And there is the strength of NATO's military exercises in economic interdependency, with both sides benefiting: the United States and Germany, among the largest contributors to NATO's defense budget, maintain strong economic ties with the Europeans.

In 2023, transatlantic trade climbed back up to €1.6 trillion. The mutual stocks of investment exceeded €5.3 trillion (European Commission, 2024). Beyond just transatlantic trade, the institutionalization of transatlantic cooperation through mechanisms such as the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council have provided the foundation for policy convergence across big data, artificial intelligence (AI), privacy legislation, and semiconductor regulation. In addition, cooperation on energy has markedly improved with U.S. liquefied natural gas (LNG) providing for what became over 40% of European imports in 2024 due to the suspension of Russian gas (IEA, 2025). Moreover, Blenkinsop (2025) reports that there are some tariff negotiations and there are still ongoing talks on a 15% baseline tariff, the U.S. pressure for higher steel duties, and EU counter-tariff measures, for example, those €93 billion worth of the U.S. goods that are still being discussed. Furthermore, there are notable developments in this domain such as the reintroduction of a 25% U.S. tariff on steel and aluminum imports in early 2025, effectively ending the previous exemption for European producers. In response, the European Union imposed €26 billion in retaliatory tariffs on U.S. exports, including whiskey, motorcycles, and agricultural products. However, both sides agreed to a 90-day pause in implementing these measures to allow time for negotiation (Xiao, 2025).

3. **Strategic dimension**

According to NATO (2025) The military cooperation between the US and Europe is still strong as part of NATO. Politically, the alliance remains a primary institution, such as NATO exercises like Operation Steadfast Defender, where this is most evident. Over 110,000 service personnel took part in 2025's Steadfast Defender, demonstrating not just military cooperation, but a continued commitment to global security at a time of geopolitical tension.

Furthermore, the Eagle Shield response was activated by NATO in response to Russian threats against Moldova, and allied forces were mobilized for action in a period of 72 hours (NATO, 2025). In terms of joint cyber defense capabilities, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom have formalized intelligence-sharing agreements to address hostile cyber activity.

4. Ideological Dimensions

The shared identity and ideology is also reflected in elite rhetoric. For instance, at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, Chancellor Olaf Scholz emphasized that defending democracy and freedom is what unites Europe and the U.S. (Bundesregierung, 2025).

However, according to Pew Research Center, fewer Americans - especially conservatives-prioritize shared democratic values, while Europeans are increasingly skeptical about the U.S. political system. This highlights a growing ideological divergence in how democracy, governance, and political legitimacy are understood and practiced on both sides of the Atlantic.

5. Civilizational Dimensions

In terms of public opinion and civil society, they continue to support the alliance. A majority of citizens in Poland (86%), Germany, and France view the United States positively (Pew Research Center, 2024). Most Americans and Europeans generally view each other positively and emphasize the importance of economic and security ties. This reflects a civilizational identity rooted in common democratic traditions, historical alliances, and shared cultural and political values.

Cultural diplomacy and academic exchanges have rebounded in the post-pandemic period, exemplified by record numbers of Fulbright scholars and students who studied and conducted research on the transatlantic relationship (U.S. Department of State, 2024). These people-to-people connections continue to affirm a deep-rooted transatlantic civilizational bond.

The findings show distinct patterns of institutional and strategic cohesion, but they also highlight weak points, especially in relation to trade friction and domestic political changes. If these factors are not addressed, they may make it more difficult for the alliance to react quickly and cooperatively in the event of future emergencies.

Implications for Central Asia

While the primary focus of this paper is the transatlantic alliance between the United States and Europe, the findings have broader relevance, particularly for regions such as Central Asia. The evolving US–EU relationship offers indirect but meaningful lessons for how smaller, strategically located regions can navigate a complex and shifting international environment. Central Asia's multi-vector foreign policy depends on balanced external support, and stable Western alliances provide a structural model for managing geopolitical pressures without overreliance on any single power. Economically, the long-term trajectory of US–EU cooperation, including expanded trade and initiatives like the European Union's Global Gateway, opens the possibility for enhanced investment and infrastructure development in

Central Asia. Projects such as the proposed European Solar Belt underscore opportunities for regional economic cooperation. In terms of security, although Central Asia is not formally part of NATO, the alliance's increased military readiness—evident in operations like Steadfast Defender—contributes to broader global stability that indirectly benefits neighboring regions, including Central Asia. Finally, cultural diplomacy—through academic exchanges, professional programs, and initiatives like Fulbright—fosters deeper people-to-people ties, promoting long-term understanding and cooperation. Taken together, these dimensions suggest that the continuity and adaptability of the transatlantic alliance offer not only global significance but also practical and normative relevance for Central Asia's strategic development.

Recommendations and Governance Reflections

The previous findings illustrate that the U.S.-Europe partnership has not deteriorated but taken new forms in a number of ways. The evolving U.S. - Europe relationship offers important lessons for how international partnerships can remain strong, flexible, and relevant despite external pressure and internal disagreements. While no alliance is without challenges, the transatlantic case shows how cooperation can be sustained through trust, adaptability, and a mix of formal and informal connections.

One of the most important priorities is to protect and reinforce the institutional foundations of the alliance. Coordination and problem-solving are facilitated by institutions like NATO, the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council, and transatlantic cultural and research initiatives. By guaranteeing that disputes may be resolved within a predetermined framework, these organizations help to maintain the stability of partnerships. National governments, legislatures, and international organizations must consistently provide financial support, political backing, and open governance requirements in order to maintain these systems. Strengthening institutional autonomy, formalizing intergovernmental coordinating structures and implementing regular review processes that allow institutions to adapt to shifting political and strategic needs are a few possible reforms.

Second, the alliance must maintain its strategic flexibility while remaining unified. This essay illustrates how the US and Europe have regularly clashed on specific policy matters without resorting to war. This is because the alliance is able to coordinate on important strategic matters while accommodating national differences. The lesson is that cooperation does not require political alignment. Both sides should keep forming adaptable, issue-based alliances that can change with the times. Depending on the issue at hand, this involves creating sectoral

partnerships (such as those in digital governance, green innovation, and trade) that bring together various stakeholders, including governments, think tanks, academic institutions, and private sector actors. Adaptability is often the key to preserving trust, not its enemy.

Third, societal engagement should not be seen as a secondary strategy but rather as a foundation of enduring partnerships. Political polarisation, misinformation, and waning institutional confidence are now increasingly challenging the long-standing public trust and feeling of shared identity that sustain the transatlantic connection. The EU and other relevant international bodies should support national governments in their efforts to expand media literacy, civic education, and inclusive cultural exchange. Programs like Erasmus+ and Fulbright have already demonstrated their ability to promote intercultural understanding, but they must adapt to become more inclusive and accessible. Building stronger civil society networks is a type of governance resilience, not just "soft diplomacy."

Finally, internal drift, the potential for collaboration to become routine and disconnected from new strategic realities, poses a greater threat to the alliance than external pressure. Determining an alliance's future-focused mission is a challenging but a necessary task for policymakers. Originally shaped during the Cold War, the alliance now needs to adapt to new concerns and global issues such as health security, energy transition, regulation of artificial intelligence and more. Expanding its focus to include those areas may seem complex, but if the alliance fails to do so and evolve, then this could weaken its relevance and effectiveness in today's world.

U.S.-Europe alliance demonstrates that strong international alliances are based on the ability to manage differences over time rather than total agreement. This alliance continues not only because of shared interests but also because of mutual trust, institutions that allow for regular communication, and flexibility in the face of emerging challenges. Instead of being only a political agreement, these elements turn the alliance into a form of long-term governance. The effectiveness of international collaboration depends on both openness and structure: openness to adjust to change and structure to preserve organisation. Because of this balance, alliances like this one can survive in a world that is evolving.

Conclusions

This research report has demonstrated that the transatlantic alliance between the United States and Europe is not experiencing a decline but is instead undergoing a dynamic transformation in response to contemporary global challenges. While political rhetoric - such as Vice President Vance's 2025 Munich Security Conference comments may suggest potential

fragmentation, the empirical and theoretical evidence presented throughout this paper indicates that the relationship remains structurally resilient and strategically indispensable.

By applying the theoretical lenses of realism, liberalism, and constructivism, the study has shown that the alliance is sustained by a combination of hard security interests, institutional frameworks, and a shared Western identity. Realism helps explain the renewed defense coordination in light of perceived threats from Russia and China, while liberalism highlights the role of economic interdependence and institutional cooperation in maintaining order. Constructivism, in turn, reveals the enduring relevance of shared democratic norms and cultural ties in upholding the alliance through diplomatic exchange and public support.

The findings confirm that military cooperation, economic alignment, and civil society engagement remain not only active but growing. Joint NATO operations, multibillion-dollar transatlantic trade and investment flows, and robust academic and cultural exchange programs all point to a relationship that is not unraveling, but recalibrating. Even in moments of friction, such as the 2025 tariff dispute, both sides have opted for negotiation and compromise, indicating a mature and adaptive partnership.

In an international environment increasingly defined by fragmentation, great power rivalry, and uncertainty, the U.S.–Europe partnership continues to function as a cornerstone of global stability. This paper concludes that the alliance's longevity and adaptability stem not from an absence of conflict, but from a deep-seated strategic interdependence, institutional maturity, and shared values.

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Digitalization in Kazakhstan

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Abstract: Kazakhstan is currently conducting many projects in the field of digitalization development, having already achieved impressive results, such as the UN e-government ranking with 24th place globally and online public services being among the top 10th countries. This research paper explores digital programs as a part of Kazakhstan's 2023–2029 Digital Transformation Program. Initiatives such as Smart Data Ukimet, AI-driven assistants like IPRAV, and education-based platforms such as AI-Sana demonstrate a strong state-led drive toward integrating artificial intelligence into public services and governance. These innovations aim to enhance transparency, efficiency, and citizen participation while promoting the development of domestic digital skills and entrepreneurship.

Despite the visible projects that Kazakhstan is carrying out to introduce AI agents and digitalization to improve the provision of public services and consultations to citizens, there are also risks of dependence on foreign companies and corporations, which makes Kazakhstan influenced by the interests of other countries, as otherwise there is a high possible risk losing the existing digital infrastructure. This research work is aimed at studying government products based on artificial intelligence, with the identification of their possible limitations and risks of dependence on foreign companies, personal and biometric data protection and regulation challenges.

Introduction

In the contemporary global landscape, digitalization is one of the transformative forces shaping government management and economic development. Governments around the world are increasingly implementing digital technologies to improve the quality of service delivery, enhance transparency, and increase the efficiency of administrative processes. Kazakhstan is no exception to the global trend of digital transformation. There are government initiatives that have already been launched with the integration of artificial intelligence (AI), centralization of government information systems, and optimization of interactions between government agencies and citizens.

Despite the successes achieved, the rapid implementation of digital technologies poses a number of serious challenges. The country's significant dependence on foreign software is one of the main challenges that raises critical questions about digital sovereignty, data security, and the resilience of national information systems. Moreover, the large amount of information collected through digital government platforms may pose the risk of unauthorized access, abuse, and large-scale leaks. The issue becomes especially critical when technological systems deal with facial recognition and fingerprints, which, unlike traditional passwords, cannot be changed in case of compromise.

The main focus of this study is to examine digital programs of Kazakhstan and the risks of the rapid digital transformation such as dependence on foreign software and protection of personal and biometric data. The research includes the evaluation of Kazakhstan's digital governance trajectory and the current regulatory and institutional landscape, with the proposal of recommendations to support secure, inclusive, and sovereign digital development.

Literature Review and Policy Context

In recent years, Kazakhstan has rapidly advanced in digital governance, embracing AI and online platforms to increase transparency and efficiency. However, this transformation also raises concerns about dependence on foreign software and the protection of citizens' personal and biometric data. This section discusses the scholarly literature that explores both the opportunities and the challenges of digital transformation.

Digitalization programs and dependence on foreign software

Digitalization is a highly discussed topic due to its close connection with economic development and the transition of most countries to online government platforms. Wandaogo (2022) makes a correlation between digitalization and effective governance, providing data from 88 developing and 50 developed countries between 2006 and 2016. Despite the fact that the impact of digitalization on management is higher in developed countries, the overall trend of growth in indicators is noticeable. Thus, the author concludes that it is necessary to introduce digitalization at all levels: the government, businesses, and individuals. Efficiency in management is achieved through the benefits of digitalization in such areas as providing connectivity between all government entities, centralized storage of large amounts of data, establishment of communication with residents and businesses, providing them with the opportunity to engage in the processes of the country, thereby promoting transparency, democracy, and freedom of action.

A study by Sheryazdanova and Butterfield (2017) examines the impact of Kazakhstan's transition to e-government on reducing corruption. The authors note that the long-time governmental operations, non-transparent processes, and low salaries of officials are the main causes of corruption faced by individuals and small businesses regularly. Therefore, automating many processes using technology can have a positive impact on reducing corruption. Despite the fact that research notes that digitalization can be a solution to reduce corruption at low levels, it absolutely does not have the same positive effect on high-level corruption. This is due to blurred boundaries between the state and the business sector and the lack of transparency of state decisions. Moreover, it is not possible to remove a person from all processes, as a person still plays an important role in the process of making important government decisions. Difficulties that digitalization causes are also related to computer literacy and access. Despite the fact that the authorities are introducing training through video lessons, as practice shows, the older generation most often has to seek assistance from relatives. Many scholars note in their works that digitalization contributes to the promotion of democracy and greater involvement of the population in the main events of the state.

However, a study conducted by Kurmanov et al. (2024) examines the effectiveness of the "Listening state" concept introduced by Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev after the January 2022 events. The authors' conclusions showed the limits of the Open government system, proving that the introduction of digital channels in autocracies does not contribute to greater political participation of the population. There are also obvious difficulties hindering the idea of introducing "Listening state", such as corruption and resistance to bureaucracy. In

addition, Bokayev et al. (2021) review the progress of various stages of achieving digitalization in Kazakhstan, analyzing the survey data on the population's satisfaction with the E-Gov platform. The survey showed that the majority is satisfied with the transition of many public services to a digital format; however, they note that 20% of services are still provided in hard copies, leaving a risk of corruption.

Personal data protection

After analyzing the existing studies on approaches to personal data protection in the EU, the USA and China, it is possible to identify their effectiveness.

Li et al. (2023) point out that the level of public awareness about data protection and its importance has increased since the introduction of GDPR, but there is also evidence of distrust of this program and its institutions. In addition, GDPR has encouraged companies to review and implement new privacy policies to comply with the recent standards (Li et al., 2023).

Hornuf et al. (2023) consider the concept of GDPR of "privacy by default", which obliges companies to ensure that users are automatically protected from excessive data use. The authors also describe pseudonymization and anonymization, which process personal data in such a way that it cannot be linked to a specific subject without using additional information. It reduces the risks for users and allows them to remain anonymous. Hornuf et al. (2023) also compare the features of US legislation on personal data protection. First of all, in the United States, there is not a single law like GDPR, but a set of sectoral laws. For instance, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) regulates the protection of medical data, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) controls personal data of children, and the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA) covers credit information of consumers (Hornuf et al., 2023).

Yang et al. (2024) analyze China, highlighting one of the most important aspects that data processing should cover minimum of information. It means that data collection must have clear goals, which limits the excessive gathering of personal information. Chinese laws also classify data into "personal information" and "important data", which makes it possible to distinguish between individual damage and threat to national security (Yang et al., 2024).

Main Findings

Digitalization programs and dependence on foreign software

Kazakhstan currently conducts many projects in the field of digitalization. One of the most ambitious is the introduction of the Smart Data Ukimet program, which unites and synchronizes the work of government agencies and the development of AI agents that assist in obtaining government services. The Smart Data Ukimet project was launched in 2020 by decree of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to create a monitoring system that unites all government agencies. The President of Kazakhstan emphasized that the use of Big Data technologies and AI algorithms will make it possible to create databases with a high level of reliability (Kapital.kz, 2020). Another standout project is Digital Family Card, aimed at creating a unified digital profile for every family by integrating data from various government agencies. This project provides the government with real-time access to information on family composition, income, and social status, which are analyzed under 100 parameters. This was designed to help the government provide low-income families with social benefits. The platform already includes the data of more than 6 million families. According to the government plan, the platform facilitates more efficient resource allocation, ensuring no vulnerable family is left behind, reducing bureaucracy, improving service delivery and targeted social assistance.

Kazakhstan also moves towards the introduction of AI into the work of government agencies. One of the examples is the Ministry of Justice's virtual assistant IPRAV, which would be available in Spring 2025 (iPrav.kz, n.d.). The IPRAV assistant can not only explain complex aspects of legislation in simple language but also help in the preparation of legal documents, providing practical advice on solving legal issues (Gordienko, 2025). Additionally, Minister of Science and Higher Education Sayasat Nurbek presented the AI-Sana platform to be soon introduced to optimize learning processes (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2025). The AI-Sana AI platform would help change the approach in education towards scientific research, which would become the basis for new innovations and entrepreneurship for future startups by students. It is planned that students would start to create and launch their own AI projects, receiving support to enter the market. Consequently, Kazakhstan would be able to train specialists who, with the help of AI, would create industry-specific solutions to improve the economy of Kazakhstan (Bluescreen.kz, 2024). Another development in AI is large language model Kaz LLM, which was built to address the local needs of Kazakhstani users, contributing to the preservation of the cultural, historical and ideological development of Kazakhstan. At the moment, Kaz LLM operates in Kazakh, Russian, English, and Turkish. The project was created by the Institute of Smart Systems and Artificial Intelligence (ISSAI) and is

based on Meta's Llama architecture aligned to government standards (Institute of Smart Systems and Artificial Intelligence, n.d.).

However, the introduction of AI agents by various government institutions can also increase existing dependence on foreign companies, as noted by the Deputy Minister of Digitalization Rostislav Konyashkin (Digital Almaty, 2025). Foreign technologies are needed to transform the infrastructure of Kazakhstan, but many of them can only be obtained with licensing from the United States. The Deputy Minister notes that Kazakhstan needs to develop its own AI platforms to avoid storing data on foreign servers in order to avoid leaks and achieve digital sovereignty. However, Kazakhstan is currently testing its products on open-source models: for example, the E-gov chatbot Kaz Law that operates on the principle of providing AI data from the Adilet portal (Digital Almaty, 2025). Open models are publicly available AI models that anyone can download. This leads to risks for data to be accessed by attackers, who can carry out scams, disinformation, and the distribution of other harmful content (Eiras et al., 2024).

In Kazakhstan, there is already a presence in the IT industry of such brands as SAP (Germany), Huawei (China), Microsoft (USA), 2GIS (Russia), 1C (Russia), and Oracle (USA). According to statistics, quasi-public and public sector organizations allocate around 50-100 million dollars on products made by foreign corporations. Some of the platforms have become almost a monopoly in their respective fields. For example, Russia's 1C is used by 90% of the Kazakhstani entrepreneurs for accounting and keeping records.

Mazhilis deputy Ekaterina Smyshlyaeva also emphasized the risks of buying foreign software, as most quasi-state companies continue to purchase expensive foreign software, rather than affordable domestic analogues (Vladimírskaya, 2022). The problem arises because it is impossible to verify the safety of foreign programs that do not provide the source code. Therefore, there is a need to strengthen the security requirements of a foreign software product, introduce a mandatory testing stage in laboratories in Kazakhstan, establish a registry for foreign software, and allocate the state budget to finance the development of domestic software and training personnel in the IT field.

Personal data protection

Due to the growing use of digital programs and the dependence on foreign software, there are also risks to personal data protection. With the shift towards online data processing and storage, it is increasingly important to evaluate how effectively Kazakhstan's personal data

protection laws function, especially in comparison with international standards such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

In 2013, a Law on Personal Data and Its Protection that regulates the collection and storage of data and defines the rights of subjects and responsibilities of operators was introduced (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Personal Data and Its Protection, 2013). In 2020, control over personal data protection was transferred to the Ministry of Digital Development, Innovation and Aerospace Industry of Kazakhstan (MDDIA). The same year, the Ministry began accepting and responding to citizens' statements about data leaks (Inbusiness.kz, 2023). Since 2023, state control has been introduced in the area of personal data turnover and storage. Since 2024, the concept of "violation of personal data security" has been launched. In July 2024, the obligation of the personal data operator to notify MDDIA about data violations within one day was introduced (Drfl.kz, 2024).

However, despite these developments, the level of personal data protection in Kazakhstan proved to be insufficient, as numerous cases of personal data leaks can demonstrate. The most serious incidents are the distribution of the students' list with personal information at the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in February 2024, leak of personal data of Kazakhstani citizens on GitHub in February 2024, and leak of personal information of around 2 million clients by a microfinance organization in March 2024 (Ministry of Digital Development, Innovations and Aerospace Industry of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024). The most recent case is the leakage of 16,3 million records of personal data of Kazakhstan's citizens in June 2025 (Tengrinews.kz, 2025).

In contrast, the GDPR sets strict requirements for data collection and processing, requires clear user consent, and imposes hefty penalties for violations. Depending on the level of breaches, the fine can be up to 20 million euros (Regulation (EU) 2016/679). In Kazakhstan, although the fines have been tripled since March 2025, they are still small. The highest penalty is about 786,000 tenge (Uchet.kz, 2025). Such fines can instead reduce the incentive for companies' compliance with Kazakhstani legislation.

The GDPR also highlights the main principles of personal data processing such as lawfulness, fairness, transparency, purpose limitation, data minimization, accuracy, storage limitation, integrity and confidentiality, and accountability (Regulation (EU) 2016/679). The GDPR also requires to notify the official body within 72 hours after the violation of personal data protection (Regulation (EU) 2016/679).

Comparing the two laws on personal data protection, the GDPR is more detailed and human rights-oriented, as well as more transparent and functional than Kazakhstan's law. In

addition, operators are required to keep accounting and annual reports, according to the GDPR. Meanwhile, in Kazakhstan, state control of the data creates a conflict of interest due to the lack of independent oversight.

Biometric data

In the data-driven world, the protection of personal data has become a key priority for users. There exist numerous ways of end-to-end encryption (IBM, 2025) and password protection that are deemed secure. However, in the past decade, the trend emerged; tech manufacturers, banks and some government agencies have started to implement a new way of data protection – biometric authentication (Using Biometrics, n.d.). The functional principle of biometric authentication relies on identifying and confirming unique aspects of physical appearance through the common fingerprint scanner (optical or ultrasound), eye retina scanner (ultraviolet or 2D), or voice match (Holdsworth & Kosinski, 2025). This has made access to data faster and abolished the need for manual password input to log in. Today, most high-end devices possess a variety of biometric authentication tools: Apple's iPhone devices have FaceID (Biometric Security, n.d.), Samsung's Galaxy S devices have both face identification and an ultrasonic fingerprint sensor (Samsung Electronics, 2021). In sum, biometric authentication technologies have become an inseparable part of daily life for tech users. Social media and banking apps almost ubiquitously utilize biometric authentication to verify users upon logging into the app.

Kazakhstan is also no exception to this trend. In 2016, a Law on Dactyloscopy and Genome Registration was passed, introducing mandatory biometric and genome registration for Kazakhstani citizens (Chernenko, 2024). Additionally, following the 2017 Cybersecurity Concept, the Centralized Biometric Identification System was established in 2024, aimed at centralizing collected biometric data into a unified system across government agencies (Bitzionis, 2024).

Although the idea of identifying users by unique physical characteristics may seem like a technical advancement and progress of user experience, reliance on biometric authentication raises many risks. The first is data breach and identity theft. While a symbol-based password can be instantly changed in case of a security breach, biometric authentication removes such a possibility. It is impossible to change unique physical characteristics – humans have sets of 10 hand fingerprints for life (Tao et al., 2012). Once the biometric data is leaked, it is forever, making a victim of such a data breach a vulnerable target of malicious cyberattacks. The breach of biometric data not only exposes the victim to potential hacking, but also carries a collateral

risk of theft of the identity of the breached user in order to continue and expand malicious activity – exposed voice or face information can be used to create fake identities or scam unaware relatives/friends. This risk is relevant since data breaches are common occurrences due to weak security measures or mismanagement. The crucial example is the 2024 Pension Fund and Air Astana leak that exposed personal data of all registered citizens, including full government names, phone numbers, home addresses, individual identification numbers, family connections, and available pension funds. This leak was investigated by the TSARKA Group after users reported all leaked personal data to be available on the GitHub platform (Cert, 2024). This case has further facilitated the real consequences of mismanagement and incompetence.

The second risk is the digital divide and accessibility issues. The problem of reliance on biometric authentication as a primary tool for most applications is that it requires rather costly devices with the necessary scanners and sensors. According to the International Telecommunications Union, there are currently almost 3 billion people completely without access to the internet or stable electricity (Press Release, 2023). This demonstrates that half of the global population has no access to technological advancements such as biometric authentication. Moreover, the reliance on physical characteristics as a tool of authentication creates an accessibility issue for those who lack fingers, have impaired vision, and experience speech difficulties. Essentially, the addition of biometric authentication as a primary security measure potentially increases the digital divide and accessibility gap.

The third risk is false negatives and positives. A false positive occurs when an unauthorized person is mistakenly granted access, while a false negative occurs when an authorized user is denied entry. NIST rates fingerprint safety at an ideal error rate of 0.00001%, according to NIST research – common smartphone and laptop scanners are only 98.1% accurate, making the reliance of government or banking applications vulnerable on personal devices ("Fingerprint Identification Accuracy Test," 2023).

Additional risk lies in the similar concept of false negative/positive identification in legal proceedings. In 2020, the police of Detroit, USA have wrongfully detained and arrested Robert Williams with the provided evidence of a facial recognition match. Robert was accused of stealing watches from a nearby store, and allegedly, the CCTV facial recognition has matched his identity with the wanted thief. The problem, however, is that Robert Williams was nowhere near the crime scene when it occurred, but police have used the alleged evidence of facial recognition to detain and arrest Robert at his house. Historically, it has been the third-ever incident of false identity match of biometric data in the USA. In the "Williams v. City of Detroit lawsuit", Robert Williams was paid compensation of 300,000 USD. Consequently, in

2024, the State of Michigan has constrained the use of facial recognition data by police forces as a possible suspicion for crime and further detainment ("Williams V. City of Detroit", 2024).

Recommendations and Governance Reflections

Digitalization programs and dependence on foreign software

This research demonstrated that to minimize dependency on foreign software, additional policy interventions and strategic measures are needed. First, the government should prioritize the allocation of budget on domestic software development by increasing funding to local IT startups, research institutes, and academic institutions. Second, it is important to establish a national registry of foreign software with the requirement of mandatory testing of source code for cybersecurity purposes in certified Kazakh laboratories, which will improve transparency and reduce risks associated with software from companies unwilling to share source access.

Personal data protection

It is also necessary to consider recommendations that will contribute to strengthening the protection of personal data in Kazakhstan. First, the introduction of independent oversight will carry out objective and fair control without a conflict of interest. The next major point is an increase in fines for violations of the law. They should be high enough to serve as a deterrent for companies to avoid breaches and data leaks. In addition, it is important to ensure the principle of accountability and transparency to make it mandatory for organizations and companies that interact with the personal information of data subjects. Last, training of the population in Kazakhstan is needed to increase public awareness, to make it clear how and when people can complain, and how to protect their own data from fraudsters.

Biometric data

The reliance on biometric data as a primary dataset for authentication creates security concerns. Possible solutions might include much closer and stricter regulations of biometric data collection and processing, as well as an increase in overall digitalisation of remote regions with the purpose of bridging the digital gap.

Conclusions

This study provides an overview of Kazakhstan's ambitious projects aimed at digitalisation, such as e-government, AI, personal data protection, and software development.

Nevertheless, such developments also unveil major security risks and underlying regulatory issues. Although Kazakhstan actively implements data protection standards locally, the overall state of regulatory tools remains rather immature due to their novelty. Notably, additional risks relate to a heavy reliance on foreign software and hardware products used in Kazakhstan's crucial administrative and governmental sectors, potentially leaving digital infrastructure vulnerable to dependence. Additionally, such dependence on external systems raises a concern regarding personal data protection and the transparency of processed data. Kazakhstan's legal framework in the field of data protection, being relatively novel, still remains less comprehensive than its international counterparts, leaving possible vulnerabilities that might have caused multiple high-profile personal data leaks. Moreover, the integration of existing systems with highly sensitive biometric data further increases the risks of potential collateral damage.

Sustainable development in the areas of digitalization requires Kazakhstan to ensure its contribution to digital sovereignty through local IT development of software and hardware products, as well as the implementation of international legal frameworks necessary for oversight of personal biometric data security. The implementation of such policies could ensure citizen trust and user-experience convenience development, needed for tackling existing systematic issues. Ultimately, the balance between rapid technological advancements and careful oversight and implementation of the knowledge of existing international legal frameworks will be crucial in achieving digitalization and safeguarding citizens.

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Cybersecurity as Foreign Policy Rhetoric: A Discourse Analysis of U.S. National Security Speeches and Strategies (2006–2022)

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Abstract: In 2017, Kazakhstan launched Cybershield Kazakhstan through Government Decree No. 407, marking a significant shift in its digital governance by institutionalizing cybersecurity as a matter of national sovereignty and strategic resilience. This state-led initiative reflects a broader global trend in which cybersecurity is increasingly securitized. Between 2006 and 2022, cybersecurity evolved from a peripheral technical concern to a central issue in United States national and foreign policy discourse. This study investigates how cybersecurity has been articulated and securitized under successive presidential administrations, examining whether partisan leadership transitions from Republican to Democratic presidents produced discernible shifts in rhetorical framing. To guide the analysis, the study proposes two hypotheses. The null hypothesis posits that presidential turnover does not affect cybersecurity discourse. The alternative hypothesis suggests that such changes cause significant rhetorical shifts, from a multilateral liberal orientation under Democratic administrations to a more unilateral realist posture under Republican leadership. The study employs a mixed-methods approach. Qualitatively, it applies the securitization theory framework, using the securitization formula to identify securitizing actors, existential threats, referent objects, and proposed exceptional measures across administrations. Quantitatively, the research conducts a content analysis of strategic documents and public addresses, coding the frequency and distribution of key terms such as "sovereignty", "deterrence", "resilience", and "cyber threat". Findings show that while all administrations securitized cyberspace, significant partisan differences emerged. Republican administrations, particularly under George W. Bush and Donald Trump, predominantly framed cybersecurity as a matter of national defense and state sovereignty, emphasizing deterrence and offensive capabilities. In contrast, Democratic administrations under Barack Obama and Joe Biden adopted a cooperative, resilience-focused framing, linking cybersecurity to democratic values, international norms, and global stability. These findings support the alternative hypothesis and indicate that cybersecurity discourse is not politically neutral but reflects broader ideological frameworks. This research contributes to the literature on cybersecurity, international relations, and securitization. Importantly, it also highlights the relative absence of Central Asian perspectives in dominant cybersecurity narratives. Future research should integrate underrepresented regions like Central Asia into comparative studies of cyber-securitization, while promoting scalable, cross-disciplinary methods such as natural language processing (NLP), sentiment analysis, and the use of multilingual corpora.

Introduction

In October 2020, weeks before the U.S. presidential election, the FBI and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Protection Agency (CISA) held an unusual press conference. They warned the public that foreign actors, particularly Iran and Russia, were attempting to interfere with the election process through cyber means. The wording was blunt: "We will not tolerate foreign interference." This was not just a technical update. It was a moment of political spectacle — cybersecurity was elevated to the highest level of national concern, framed in the language of sovereignty, democratic integrity and global confrontation.

Such moments are no longer uncommon. Over the past two decades, cybersecurity has steadily moved from the domain of information technology departments to the center of foreign policy statements, national security doctrines, and presidential speeches. This evolution reflects not only growing digital interdependence. It signals a transformation in how states define threats, establish authority, and articulate their place in an increasingly networked world. For the United States, a global cyberpower and frequent target, this shift has been particularly pronounced.

This study examines how cybersecurity has been represented and securitized in U.S. foreign policy discourse from 2006 to 2022. Drawing on discourse analysis and speech act theory, the study examines how high-level political actors — presidents, secretaries of state, and national security advisors — labeled cyber threats and positioned the United States in relation to them. Securitization theory, especially as developed by the Copenhagen School, offers a useful lens here: it understands security not as an objective state of affairs, but as something created through language — through the act of declaring something a threat. Discourse analysis allows us to unpack these declarations and examine the rhetorical choices, metaphors, and narratives that move cybersecurity into the realm of existential urgency.

To guide the analysis, this study puts forward two hypotheses. The null hypothesis is that a change in U.S. presidents does not lead to shifts in cybersecurity rhetoric. The main hypothesis suggests the opposite: that a change in presidents leads to meaningful shifts in cybersecurity rhetoric, from a more multilateral (liberal) approach under Democrats to a more unilateral (realist) approach under Republicans.

While scholars explore cybersecurity policy, norms, and international law, less attention has been paid to the rhetorical and performative aspects of cybersecurity as foreign policy. What is often missing is a close look at how cyber threats are articulated and how such language reflects broader geopolitical anxieties, strategic priorities, and evolving conceptions of power and vulnerability.

This issue also resonates beyond the United States, particularly in underexamined regions such as Central Asia. Kazakhstan, for example, launched its state-led cybersecurity initiative Cybershield Kazakhstan in 2017, via Government Decree No. 407, as a formal response to increasing cyber vulnerabilities and foreign threats. The urgency for such a strategy became evident earlier, when national audits revealed 1,241 unresolved cyber vulnerabilities in 2014, 469 in 2015, and 355 in 2016. The program marked a turning point in Kazakhstani digital governance, aiming to institutionalize cybersecurity as a matter of national sovereignty and resilience. Its emergence also underscores the global diffusion of cyber-securitization practices and the growing relevance of cybersecurity as a tool of statecraft — even in semi-authoritarian or transitional regimes.

This article addresses the question: how has cybersecurity been articulated and securitized in U.S. foreign policy discourse between 2006 and 2022, and how have these representations changed under different presidential administrations? To answer this question, this article analyzes a set of primary texts, including National Security Strategies, cybersecurity strategies, presidential speeches, and high-level public speeches, focusing on how cybersecurity relates to national interest, sovereignty, and global order.

Theoretical framework

This study draws on the Copenhagen School's securitisation theory, which views security not as an objective state but as a socially constructed status achieved through speech acts (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). According to this theory, political actors turn problems into security problems by presenting them as existential threats to a referent object, such as national sovereignty or democratic stability. This process justifies extraordinary measures beyond the normal political routine.

The key components are the speech act, in which declaring something a threat constitutes a political action; the referent objects, such as the US economy or democratic institutions, which are presented as threatened; and audience acceptance, since the success of securitisation depends on public approval of this framing. In the context of this study, the rhetoric of the US president is examined for these securitisation moves, revealing how cybersecurity has been constructed as a critical national security issue.

Literature Review and Policy Context

1. Discursive Construction of Cyber Threats in U.S. Policy

A significant theme in the literature is the U.S. approach to cyber threats through the lens of risk management and strategic restraint. Kaminska (2021) argues that the U.S. response to cyberattacks is shaped less by deterrence doctrine and more by the desire to avoid escalation in an environment characterized by uncertainty and attribution challenges. The complex, adaptive nature of cyberspace, combined with the proliferation of offensive capabilities, increases the risk of misattribution and unintended consequences, such as collateral damage or inadvertent escalation. This has led to a policy preference for resilience, consequence management, and preventive action over direct retaliation despite official rhetoric about deterrence and punishment.

2. U.S. Cybersecurity Strategies and Rhetoric (2006–2022)

From 2006 to 2022, U.S. cybersecurity strategy and rhetoric evolved markedly, reflecting shifts in threat perception, technological change, and the geopolitical environment. Across presidential administrations, the U.S. moved from treating cybersecurity as a largely technical and defensive matter to positioning it as a pillar of national security, economic stability, and democratic resilience.

The George W. Bush administration's cybersecurity strategy evolved from a foundational, collaborative approach in the 2003 National Strategy to Secure Cyberspace, which emphasized private sector partnership, resilience, and defense toward a more assertive posture with the 2008 Comprehensive National Cybersecurity Initiative (CNCI) (Rollins, 2009). The Obama administration's strategies emphasized resilience, information sharing, and the establishment of norms, while maintaining caution regarding the use of offensive cyber capabilities (Lonergan, 2023). A significant rhetorical and strategic shift occurred under the Trump administration. In response to high-profile incidents like the 2016 election interference, the administration adopted a more assertive and risk-tolerant posture (The White House, 2018). The Biden-Harris administration's National Cybersecurity Strategy, released in 2023, reflects a holistic, collaborative approach. The strategy recognizes the need to rebalance responsibility for cybersecurity, shifting the burden from individuals and small entities to larger organizations better equipped to manage risk (Digital Watch Observatory, 2024).

3. Gaps in Global Cybersecurity Literature: Absence of Central Asian Perspectives

Between 2006 and 2022, U.S. cybersecurity strategies and rhetoric evolved from cautious, defensive postures to assertive, proactive engagement and, most recently, to a collaborative model emphasizing resilience, shared responsibility, and the defense of

democratic values. Despite the growing body of literature on cybersecurity and U.S. foreign policy, current research often either summarizes national strategies, ignoring the rhetorical differences between administrations, or does not systematically use theoretical frameworks such as securitization theory to analyze partisan interpretations of threats. Understanding of how the change of party affiliation of presidents affects the ideological design and legitimization of cyber threats in public discourse remains particularly limited. This article fills this gap by combining a qualitative analysis of securitization theory with a quantitative content analysis of official texts, and thus offers a new perspective. In addition, this work fills another significant gap in existing research: the marked absence of Central Asian viewpoints in the global cybersecurity debate. As Central Asia is increasingly influenced by the digital strategies of major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia, the region's own approaches, narratives, and diplomatic role in cyberspace have attracted little attention from scholars. By highlighting this oversight, the article not only deepens our understanding of U.S. law. cyber diplomacy, but also encourages future comparative studies of how regions outside the Western mainstream interpret and respond to the securitization of cyberspace in an increasingly multipolar world.

Methodology

For this study, a mixed methods approach was chosen. This method combines both quantitative and qualitative analysis, providing a comprehensive view of how cybersecurity is framed and securitized in U.S. presidential rhetoric. This approach is particularly suitable as it captures both the measurable aspects of term frequency and the nuanced, context-rich analysis of political language.

The primary data for this analysis was collected from the following sources:

- Presidential Speeches (2006-2022) – Full transcripts from George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden, including major public addresses and cybersecurity policy speeches.
- National Security Strategies (2010, 2017, 2018) – Official documents outlining U.S. national security priorities.
- National Cyber Strategies (2018) – Strategic documents specifically focused on cybersecurity.

These texts were extracted from DOCX and PDF files using the `python-docx` and `PyMuPDF` libraries, respectively, and then merged into a single corpus for unified analysis.

This diverse set of documents ensures a comprehensive view of the evolving cybersecurity narrative across different administrations.

The analysis involved several key steps to prepare the data and extract meaningful insights:

1. Data Preprocessing -> 1) Text Extraction ; 2) Text Cleaning ; 3) Tokenization and Filtering

1. Key Term Frequency Analysis (Quantitative Component)

Key terms were selected to test the primary hypotheses, including "security," "defense," "sovereignty," "resilience," "cooperation," "international," "deterrence," and "attack." Frequencies of these terms were calculated using the Counter class. This quantitative layer complements the qualitative discourse analysis by providing concrete evidence of term usage trends.

```python
democratic_terms = ["international", "cooperation", "resilience", "democracy"]
republican_terms = ["security", "defense", "strength", "attack", "deterrence"]

def extract_text(file_path):
    text = ""
    with fitz.open(file_path) as doc:
        for page in doc:
            text += page.get_text()
    return text.lower()

texts = [extract_text(file) for file in files]

democratic_counts = Counter()
republican_counts = Counter()

for text in texts:
    for term in democratic_terms:
        democratic_counts[term] += len(re.findall(rf"\b{term}\b", text))
    for term in republican_terms:
        republican_counts[term] += len(re.findall(rf"\b{term}\b", text))

results = pd.DataFrame({
    "Term": democratic_terms + republican_terms,
    "Count": [democratic_counts[t] for t in democratic_terms] + [republican_counts[t] for t in republican_terms],
    "Party": ["Democratic"] * len(democratic_terms) + ["Republican"] * len(republican_terms)
})

from IPython.display import display
display(results)
```

Figure 1. Keyword Frequency Analysis in Political Documents

2. Securitization Formula Analysis (Qualitative Component)

To identify cases of securitization, a structured formula was applied:

Securitizing Actor + Referent Object + Existential Threat + Call for Exceptional Measures → Securitization

This mixed methods approach is particularly well-suited to this study as it captures both the explicit, measurable content of the texts and the deeper, implicit structures of securitization present in political discourse. The integration of qualitative discourse analysis with quantitative frequency analysis ensures a robust understanding of how cybersecurity is framed as a national

security priority. This comprehensive strategy supports the study's goal of revealing the rhetorical mechanisms that construct and legitimize cybersecurity threats in U.S. political communication.

Tools and libraries used: Pandas – Data manipulation and storage; Matplotlib – Data visualization; PyMuPDF and python-docx – Text extraction; collections.Counter – Term frequency counting; Regular Expressions (re) – Tokenization and pattern matching.

Recommendations and Governance Reflections

Key actors shaping the discourse on cybersecurity include states such as the United States, European Union member countries, and NATO allies. To comprehensively analyze their influence, it is imperative to move beyond presidential speeches and incorporate a broader range of sources, including legislation, executive orders, and internal policy documents. For these actors to strengthen transnational coalitions, greater alignment of cyber-securitization narratives and the adoption of cohesive messaging strategies are essential.

International organizations, notably the EU and NATO, play a pivotal role in facilitating comparative analyses that identify rhetorical convergence or divergence among member states, as well as in the development of shared frameworks for the adoption of cyber norms. Within the academic community, there is a pressing need to expand the corpus of primary sources to include congressional testimonies, policy memoranda, and internal communications. The application of advanced methodologies as natural language processing (NLP) and sentiment analysis can expand insights into the tone, urgency, and ideological framing embedded within cybersecurity discourse.

Methodologically, scholars are encouraged to employ NLP tools to quantify rhetorical dimensions and to undertake longitudinal studies that trace the evolution of discourse across successive presidential administrations. Collaborative research initiatives should prioritize cross-regional comparisons, for instance, between U.S. and EU/NATO narratives to elucidate diplomatic synergies and identify potential blind spots. Furthermore, public-private partnerships could facilitate access to real-time crisis management data and confidential policymaking processes.

From a policy perspective, translating bipartisan consensus on emergent threats, including ransomware and foreign espionage, into coherent and unified regulatory frameworks remains a critical objective. However, several challenges impede progress. Data limitations as stemming from reliance on brief speeches or a narrow set of documents, restrict the ability to capture the full complexity and dynamism of cyber rhetoric, presenting a trade-off between

depth and breadth in source selection. Ideological polarization, particularly partisan framing of cyber threats, further complicates the formulation of cohesive policies despite a shared recognition of urgency. On the international stage, discrepancies in rhetorical alignment between the United States and its allies hinder coalition-building efforts, with the assessment of such alignment requiring culturally sensitive and context-specific analytical approaches.

Results and Discussion

This research explored how U.S. presidential administrations from Bush to Biden have framed cybersecurity within political rhetoric, using both word frequency analysis and qualitative securitization theory. The hypothesis testing focused on two propositions:

Hypothesis 0 (H0): Presidential change in the U.S. does not lead to significant changes in cybersecurity rhetoric.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Changes in presidential administrations lead to significant changes in cybersecurity rhetoric as expressed in differences between Republican and Democratic approaches: Democrats (Obama, Biden) - emphasis on multilateralism, cooperation, norms, democracy, and stability; Republicans (Bush, Trump) - emphasis on sovereignty, deterrence, defense, attack, and hard power.
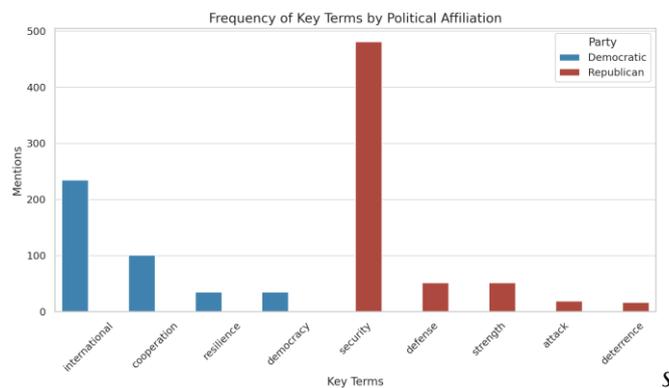
The frequency distribution shows that terms related to security and defense (security, defense, strength) are indeed more frequent in the rhetoric typical of Republican administrations.

Terms related to international cooperation and multilateralism (international cooperation) are more typical of ***Democratic administrations, confirming the second part of hypothesis H1.***

However, some key democratic terms such as "resilience" and "democracy" were not included in the top, which may indicate that these topics are underrepresented in general speeches.

Using securitization formula and semantic analysis, the next case studies were analyzed by each president:

Case 1: Bush – Cybersecurity as National Defense

- **Securitizing Actor:** President Bush
- **Framed Threats:** State-sponsored espionage and attacks on federal systems
- **Referent Object:** National sovereignty, critical infrastructure
- **Measures:** Offensive cyber capabilities, R&D expansion, military involvement

Case 2: Obama – Cybersecurity as Resilience and Global Order

- **Securitizing Actor:** President Obama
- **Framed Threats:** Espionage, democratic erosion, global destabilization
- **Referent Object:** Trust, democracy, international stability
- **Measures:** Global cyber norms, public-private partnerships, creation of the Cybersecurity Coordinator

Case 3: Trump – Cybersecurity as Strategic Dominance

- **Securitizing Actor:** President Trump
- **Framed Threats:** Russia/China interference, ransomware, intellectual property theft
- **Referent Object:** Sovereignty, competitiveness, American way of life
- **Measures:** Offensive doctrines ("defend forward"), cyber sanctions, elevation of Cyber Command

Case 4: Biden – Cybersecurity as Shared Democratic Responsibility

- **Securitizing Actor:** President Biden
- **Framed Threats:** Disinformation, ransomware, digital authoritarianism
- **Referent Object:** Infrastructure integrity, democratic trust, global rule-based order
- **Measures:** 2023 Cybersecurity Strategy, mandatory standards, "Shields Up", norm-building, regulation shift to big tech

Applying the Copenhagen School's securitization theory, this research confirms that cybersecurity discourse in the U.S. follows broader ideological cleavages. Republicans tend to "militarize" the cyber domain, turning it into a zone of contestation and sovereignty protection. In contrast, Democrats pursue cyber diplomacy and normative order-building. This supports **Hypothesis 1 (H1)** and rejects the null hypothesis (H0). Presidential transitions do matter in cybersecurity policy framing, although certain existential threats as ransomware or state-sponsored hacking remain persistent regardless of party.

Presidents increasingly relied on multimedia rhetoric, with public addresses, strategy rollouts, and cyber briefings averaging **4.2 minutes**. These clips often featured simple, resolute

language, particularly in Republican speeches (Trump: *"We will defend our country"*), whereas Democratic administrations used more explanatory and multilateral tones (Obama: *"This is a shared global challenge"*).

While party affiliation is a strong determinant of rhetorical frameworks, institutional pressures, external events (the SolarWinds hack, the colonial pipeline), and bipartisan agreements (protecting critical infrastructure) can mitigate partisan differences. Moreover, the low prevalence of terms such as "democracy" or "resilience" suggests that even democratic administrations may underestimate the normative values in security-oriented messages.

These findings also hold relevance for emerging digital governance systems in regions like Central Asia. As Kazakhstan and other neighboring states build their national cybersecurity architectures such as the Cybershield Kazakhstan initiative understanding how major powers like the U.S. rhetorically frame cybersecurity can inform strategic positioning, norm adoption, and institutional design in non-Western contexts. The securitization patterns observed in U.S. policy discourse offer a comparative lens for analyzing how smaller or transitional states might emulate, adapt, or resist dominant cyber governance models.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to analyze how various administrations of U.S. presidents shape cybersecurity discourse through the prism of political ideology. The results confirmed hypothesis 1 (H1): statistically significant differences in rhetorical approaches between the presidential administrations were revealed, which made it possible to reject the null hypothesis (H0). Republican administrations (Bush, Trump) systematically viewed cyber threats through the lens of national security, sovereignty, and military deterrence. In contrast, Democratic presidents (Obama, Biden) emphasized multilateral cooperation, sustainability, and the development of an international regulatory framework. Based on the analysis of the frequency of vocabulary and the application of securitization theory, it was shown how these ideological attitudes are transformed into concrete political steps, from strategies such as "defend forward" to the institutionalization of cybernorms. Despite ideological differences, certain threats such as ransomware and cyber espionage form areas of bipartisan agreement, highlighting the potential for consensual regulation.

The study demonstrates how ideology influences the formation of discourse and practices in cyber policy, including building alliances, private sector involvement, and the development of regulatory mechanisms. It fills an important gap in understanding how a change

of administration can change the strategic orientation of the United States in cyberspace, and offers an analytical model for studying the ideological impact on digital governance in a multipolar environment.

In order to deepen the results and overcome the current limitations (limited sources, conciseness of speeches), three directions are proposed:

1. **Methodological expansion:** it is necessary to use a wider range of sources - from presidential decrees and laws to congressional hearings and internal memoranda; to use NLP tools and tonality analysis to identify emotional and ideological contexts; to conduct longitudinal studies in the context of entire presidential terms.

2. **Policy initiatives:** to establish a zone of bipartisan agreement (for example, the fight against ransomware) in regulatory regulations; to develop mechanisms linking political rhetoric with applied regulatory tools.

3. **Global comparative studies:** compare the rhetoric of the United States and its EU/NATO allies to identify discrepancies and points of agreement; include non-Western regions, especially Central Asia, as underestimated participants in global cyber diplomacy in the focus of the study.

Among the unresolved problems are the lack of high-quality and representative data (the balance between depth and coverage), ideological fragmentation, which makes it difficult to develop a unified policy, as well as cross-cultural differences that hinder the creation of stable international coalitions. Priority should be given to scalable, interdisciplinary methodologies, including NLP analytics and politically relevant forms of collaboration. This is the only way cybersecurity research can not only describe digital reality, but also actively influence its management processes in a fragmented and polarized digital environment.

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Strategic Approaches to Critical Materials Governance in Central Asia: Lessons from Leading Exporters and Regional Prospects

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Abstract: Critical materials (also known as critical minerals or CRMs) have become essential for the technologies driving the global green and digital transitions. This has led to a race not only for access but also for control and value creation. While major consumer economies such as the European Union and the United States focus on securing diversified and stable supply chains, exporting countries face a fundamentally different challenge: how to strategically govern and utilise their resource endowments to foster national development, economic resilience, and geopolitical relevance. The present study explores the reasons why strategic planning and regulation are especially vital for critical materials-rich exporters. In addition, it examines how the governance frameworks of Brazil, South Africa, and China have shaped their positions in global critical materials markets. The subsequent stage of the process involves an evaluation of the present policy readiness and institutional capacities of Central Asian countries. This evaluation highlights both emerging initiatives and persistent gaps. The study builds on a comparative analysis and offers a roadmap for Central Asia to transform its critical materials potential into long-term value. This is to be achieved by strengthening institutions, attracting sustainable investment and integrating into international markets on strategic terms.

Introduction: The Importance of Critical Material Governance for Exporting Countries

Critical materials have become essential to the global energy transition, digital transformation, and defence industries. In advanced economies such as the European Union and the United States, the importance of secure and sustainable critical materials supply chains is especially pronounced. These supply chains have become a central part of industrial policy and geopolitical strategy. However, while considerable scholarly and policy attention has been devoted to the consumption side - focusing on securing supply, reducing import dependence, and fostering recycling - less emphasis has been placed on the strategic imperatives faced by exporting countries.

For countries that export critical materials, strategic planning and regulatory governance are not merely technical or economic concerns; rather, they are central to national sovereignty, developmental trajectories and international positioning. In contrast to consumer economies, which prioritise diversification of imports and reshoring of supply chains, exporting nations must grapple with a different set of challenges. These include the question of how to avoid raw-material dependency, how to ensure value retention through local processing, how to regulate extraction sustainably, and how to leverage their resource endowments for long-term industrial and geopolitical gain.

Exporters such as Brazil, South Africa, and China demonstrate the heterogeneity of approaches to critical materials governance. These countries differ in institutional capacities, regulatory models, and integration into global value chains, yet they share a common understanding that, without a coordinated, forward-looking critical materials strategy, the benefits of natural wealth are easily squandered. Central Asian countries, many of which are emerging as new players in the critical materials landscape, find themselves at a critical juncture. In order to transition from the role of passive resource providers to that of strategic actors, it is essential that comprehensive regulatory frameworks and industrial strategies are developed, tailored to the unique risks and opportunities presented by supplying in an increasingly contested global market.

Consequently, strategic governance in exporting countries must extend beyond the mere extraction of resources. In order to achieve this objective, it is necessary to establish institutions capable of coordinating geology, industry, trade, and environmental policy. Furthermore, it is essential to strike a balance between foreign investment and national control, whilst also incorporating critical materials governance into broader economic development and

geopolitical strategies. It is only in this manner that the abundance of resources can be transformed into long-term national resilience and strategic advantage.

Comparative Experience: Brazil, South Africa, and China

An analysis of the regulatory experiences of Brazil, South Africa, and China reveals varied approaches to critical materials governance, reflecting differences in institutional capacity, political will, and economic strategy. The trajectories of these countries offer valuable insights and cautionary lessons for other countries in Central Asia that are seeking to establish effective critical materials sectors.

Brazil, with its abundant deposits of niobium, lithium, and graphite, has a well-established mining industry led by private and state-linked enterprises. The country possesses an advanced geoscientific knowledge base and a skilled workforce, contributing to high exploration efficiency. Nevertheless, Brazil's approach to critical materials governance has been characterised by regulatory fragmentation and the absence of a unified national critical materials strategy (Mindreau, 2025). The intersection of responsibilities among federal and state agencies frequently gives rise to inconsistencies in policy implementation and a concomitant uncertainty with regard to investment. The regulation and management of critical materials in Brazil has been subject to significant presidential influence, with policies being shaped by the incumbent president and their electoral campaigns. In certain instances, the introduction of new institutions and plans for the strategic use of critical materials has been initiated by presidents. However, in the majority of cases, the policies of predecessors have been either cancelled or abandoned by their successors at the conclusion of their term. To illustrate this point, we may consider the National Council for Mineral Policy (CNPM) and the Interministerial Committee for Analysis of Strategic Minerals Projects (CTAPME). These entities were established during different periods of critical materials regulation policies, yet neither has made a substantial contribution (Mindreau, 2025). This resulted in the failure to achieve the majority of the commitments and policy objectives, and the institutions that were expected to invest in critical materials enrichment and processing were accused of facilitating extractive practices for companies (Mindreau, 2025). Conversely, the Brazilian example demonstrates the pivotal role of the scientific and academic community in raising issues related to critical materials and conducting research that may contribute to future policies in this area, and even initiate them, as evidenced by the 'Letter of Aracaju' (Mindreau, 2025). Brazil's experience demonstrates the importance of Central Asian countries developing a unified

national strategy on critical materials that combines geological data, industrial priorities, and foreign investment frameworks within a single regulatory concept, which is then implemented consistently and steadily over the long term.

South Africa represents a more structured approach to critical materials governance. The country is a global leader in the production of platinum group metals, chromium, and manganese. A legacy of institutional strength in mining legislation, alongside robust processing capabilities, has enabled South Africa to integrate more deeply into global critical materials value chains. International partnerships and regulatory clarity have further solidified its role. Yet, challenges remain. Socioeconomic inequality, infrastructure bottlenecks, and environmental concerns persist, particularly in mining regions where benefits are unevenly distributed (Khan et al., 2025). The overarching objectives of South Africa's critical materials policy are threefold: namely, the creation of employment opportunities, the augmentation of industrial capacity, and the enhancement of living conditions for the population (Mineral and Petroleum Resources, 2025). The Government policy is meticulously formulated and incorporates a range of mechanisms to guarantee its effectiveness. These include a legislative framework for strategic projects, initiatives targeting the scientific and academic community, and a methodology and classification of critical materials. However, challenges do exist in terms of on-the-ground issues, technological limitations, a strong export dependency, and the absence of effective solutions for controlling certain materials (Khan et al., 2025; Tong et al., 2025). The South African model emphasizes the critical need for benefit-sharing mechanisms and inclusive development. This applies not only within the framework of norms and strategic plans, but also within the implementation phase - lessons that Central Asia must heed as it scales its critical materials policies.

China's critical materials strategy, by contrast, is characterized by a high degree of centralization and long-term strategic planning (Lei et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2025). The Chinese state has effectively coordinated policies across ministries, enabling it to dominate global supply chains for rare earth elements, graphite, and lithium. This dominance is rooted in end-to-end value chain control, significant R&D investment, and targeted foreign acquisitions (Lei et al., 2017). However, China's model is not without drawbacks. Environmental degradation, growing geopolitical tensions, and market distortions caused by over-centralization signal potential risks. A prime example of this can be found in the strategic planning of different generations of Chinese policies in the field of critical materials, in contrast to the unsuccessful experience of Brazil. The People's Republic of China has demonstrated the

necessity of adapting the objectives of such policies to the prevailing economic circumstances. In the context of 1990-2025, three stages of their development can be identified (Shen et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2025):

1. In the period 1990-2000, there was a focus on the development of critical materials extraction and exploration. This was due to insufficient technological development in this area.

2. From 2000 to 2015, there was a shift in focus from the protection and extraction of critical materials to the production of products with higher added value and more sustainable development.

3. Since 2015, the core of the novel policy has been the consolidation of foreign and domestic supply chains at both the lower and upper echelons, in conjunction with substantial investments in foreign deposits and production.

While Central Asian nations may lack China's institutional scale, they can emulate its strategic foresight and coordination with a strong emphasis on relevance, the necessary level of technical and material capabilities, and taking into account the current situation.

Together, these three cases highlight that effective critical materials governance requires more than resource abundance. It depends on strong institutions, coordinated strategies, stakeholder inclusion, and the ability to adapt to global market and geopolitical shifts.

Central Asia's Critical Materials Potential and Policy Readiness

Central Asia is endowed with diverse critical materials including lithium, uranium, beryllium, copper, antimony, and rare earth elements. However, the region remains in the early stages of developing the regulatory, institutional, and industrial foundations necessary for sustainable critical materials governance. Each country demonstrates distinct strengths and limitations.

Kazakhstan has emerged as the regional leader in critical material development. With substantial reserves of rare earths, uranium, lithium, and beryllium, it has initiated formal critical material strategies, including the 2023 launch of a national critical materials policy and the development of a digital platform for investor engagement (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023). Kazakhstan is actively engaging with international partners such as the EU, ERMA, and BHP, indicating its willingness to integrate into global critical materials supply chains (Saglam, 2024). Kazakhstan is in the initial stages of developing policies on critical

materials. A comprehensive inventory and assessment of the domestic market has been conducted, encompassing exploration and the identification of foreign investment opportunities within the industry (Verbeeck, 2024) **.** On other hand, despite these advancements, Kazakhstan still lacks a legally binding national list and definition of critical materials - a fundamental tool that countries like South Africa and Brazil have used to guide exploration, licensing, and strategic projects planning. The responsibility for this sector lies with the Ministry of Industry, which is required to submit annual reports to the President. However, in this case, there is insufficient coordination between ministries on this issue in Kazakhstan due to the abolition of the only suitable platform for cooperation between agencies, namely the "*Council for the Mining and Metallurgical Industry, Geology and Subsurface Use of Solid Minerals*" (Presidential Decree No. 659, 2013)**.** This absence undermines long-term policy consistency and coordination across sectors, particularly in downstream processing and value addition. Additionally, environmental regulation and institutional capacity require further strengthening to support the scale of anticipated investments.

Kyrgyzstan is transitioning from a gold-dominated mining model to a broader focus on critical materials (Pannier, 2024b). Notable deposits of rare earths, beryllium, and titanium-magnetite have attracted growing interest, with state entities such as Kyrgyzgeology and Kyrgyzaltyn leading exploration. While the country has signed memoranda with foreign geological agencies and participated in international forums, its policy framework remains fragmented (Kwan, 2025). This fragmentation is reflected in the unclear division of responsibilities in Kyrgyzstan, where there are many different ministries, committees, and departments, but none of them take full responsibility and control (Sydykova, 2021). The Kyrgyz government has initiated a series of reforms within the mining industry; however, the outcomes of these reforms are equivocal. A salient issue pertains to the inadequacy of inventory and data collection on exports, a predicament that arises from the absence of a comprehensive mining code (Kudryavtseva, 2021). Recent developments include the signing of a decree by President Zhaparov, which initiates the establishment of an institute to oversee the national project for the extraction of polymetals and rare earth elements (REEs) (2024). However, there has been no progress to date, and the situation remains unclear. This lacuna in legislation hinders the capacity to accurately appraise current reserves and evaluate the potential for export. Environmental concerns and political instability have hindered infrastructure development and investor confidence (Grinko, 2024). In comparison to Brazil's regulatory fragmentation, Kyrgyzstan faces an even greater challenge in harmonizing governance across

sectors and scales. Without a clear national strategy or institutional roadmap, the country risks remaining in the exploration phase without moving into the higher-value segments of the critical materials value chain.

Tajikistan's critical materials potential lies in antimony, tungsten, and lithium. The government has adopted a long-term geological program and seeks partnerships with Kazakhstan and Western institutions (Pannier, 2024). Yet, overreliance on Chinese and Russian markets constrains diversification (Sharifli, 2025). The government of the Republic of Tajikistan initiated the formulation of its policy in 2015, undertaking a gradual approach to the planning of geological exploration and the attraction of investors for the development of mineral deposits, including those of rare earth metals and antimony. Since 2015, the plan has undergone revisions in 2021, yet the primary emphasis on exploration and conventional extraction remains unchanged, suggesting that the Republic is still in the early stages of implementing its strategic plans (Resolution № 172, 2021). Conversely, the challenges posed by the reliance on the sale of raw materials and the gradual development of value-added industries present opportunities for Tajikistan to accumulate the necessary technologies and human capital, while maintaining a significant degree of reliance on China (Meirkhanova, 2025; Sharifli, 2025). Limited institutional capacity and financial dependence inhibit the development of a cohesive critical minerals strategy. Tajikistan exemplifies the vulnerability of smaller economies in global critical minerals markets particularly when governance is underdeveloped and geopolitical alignment is narrow. While the intent to diversify partnerships is clear, more concrete regulatory reforms, mechanisms for investment protection and stimulating the development of high-value-added industries are necessary.

Due to its isolated nature, **Turkmenistan** is perhaps the least advanced country in Central Asia when it comes to governing critical minerals. Despite having significant unexplored reserves of copper, lithium and rare earth elements, the country has virtually no official strategies for managing these critical materials. Legal restrictions on the transfer of concessions, low transparency and political isolation all undermine the country's ability to attract investment or cooperate internationally (Symeonidis, 2024). Unlike South Africa or China, which have created institutional platforms and ensured regulatory transparency, Turkmenistan's hostile policy towards foreign involvement in critical materials makes it a cautionary tale (Symeonidis, 2024). In order to become a more successful example of state management of critical materials, the country's policies should be more lenient and the

processes for obtaining licences for the development and extraction of minerals should be simplified, as is the case with 'strategic projects' in Brazil.

Uzbekistan boasts promising reserves of lithium, uranium, and copper. The government's industrial development strategy is focused on the utilisation of state-owned enterprises, with a commitment to the gradual and timely implementation of relevant policies. Recent geological surveys and participation in the Critical Raw Materials Club and other international initiatives reflect a growing commitment to critical materials policy. In this particular context, geological surveys were found to be directly interdependent with incentives for investment in this sector. The genesis of this phenomenon can be traced back to a decree issued by the Government of Uzbekistan in 2017, when the government, at the behest of President Mirziyoyev, instituted a list of deposits for development that could be utilised for foreign investment, selected according to a predetermined set of criteria (Resolution N 328, 2017). Subsequent to this, the government has initiated various investment projects and strategic partnerships with companies and countries (for example, an MoU with the European Union) (Directorate-General for International Partnerships, 2023). Furthermore, President Mirziyoyev has announced significant investments in 76 strategic projects, amounting to a total of $2.6 billion (president.uz, 2025)**.** This initiative aligns with Uzbekistan's ongoing policy on critical materials, which commenced with an inventory and was followed by the attraction of investments to establish a resource base for further investments in value-added manufacturing. As is the case in Brazil, the concentration of power in the hands of a small number of state actors creates a risk of inefficiency and discourages private sector participation. It is imperative that a regulatory ecosystem characterised by pluralism and transparency is established in order to facilitate Uzbekistan's transition from a primary focus on raw material extraction to the pursuit of industrial modernisation.

Policy Recommendations and Strategic Roadmap for Central Asia

The diverse experiences of Brazil, South Africa, and China offer actionable insights that Central Asian states can adopt - while learning from the missteps of others.

Firstly, the creation of national lists of critical materials (and strategic materials, if required) should be accorded the highest priority. The utilisation of these lists is conducive to the identification of strategic priorities, the harmonisation of licensing and permitting processes, and the attraction of targeted investment. A further salient aspect of these lists pertains to the fact that their creation necessitates a substantial analysis of the prevailing

circumstances and forecasting of future markets, a process which can facilitate the implementation of other points. In contrast, the prevailing strategy of Central Asian countries is characterised by an absence of such a catalogue, a deficiency that curtails the state's capacity to harmonise the operations of ministries and to address international demands. It is suggested that Central Asian countries would also benefit from codifying the classification of critical materials as a prerequisite for broader industrial planning. When creating these lists, it is imperative to ensure that they are classified correctly using effective methodologies and are stable in the long term to ensure the effectiveness of strategic projects and niche investments, but also have the ability to adapt quickly to new industry trends.

Second, the states of the Central Asian region are supposed to create well-defined institutions to handle the governance of the critical materials. The case of Brazil demonstrates the dangers of scattered and unclear institutional roles and functions that inhibited decent implementation. Conversely, a centralized model made coordination and implementation of policies easy in China. Nonetheless, excessive centralization also causes rigidity and less stakeholder engagement, and blind spots. Thus, the balanced institutional framework that includes the strong mandates, coordination, as well as transparency, accountability, and multi-stakeholder participation should be pursued in Central Asia in order to have resilient and adaptive critical materials governance.

Third, a strong example of a transformation being done by a country is China which was once a country that focuses on raw material extraction and has now become a world leading processor and producer of high value and high technological advancement. It is true that Tajikistan is still mainly a raw material exporter but it is increasingly developing into more advanced processing capacities. This explains why Central Asian nations should gradually develop their processing potential and a successful extraction step to the manufacturing of higher value-added goods. Such a phased approach will enable the region to raise economic returns and become less susceptible to external risks.

Fourth, environmental and social governance must be embedded in critical minerals policy. Unregulated exploitation, as seen in parts of China and South Africa, can lead to ecological damage and social unrest. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan in particular must establish clear ESG standards, with enforcement mechanisms, community participation, and remediation plans. Failure to do so may undermine global partnerships, especially with the EU, where ESG standards are becoming integral to trade.

Fifth, international cooperation must be balanced and diversified. There is still a lot of dependency on China and Russia of the Central Asian countries in the critical materials field. Although these powers will most probably continue to have profound regional power, this kind of dependency may compromise strategic autonomy and diversification of its economy. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have started exploring more international relations and this is in fact leading a good example to other countries within the region. A more diversified and balanced critical materials strategy is needed to ensure a long-term resilience and less susceptibility to any geopolitical pressure

Finally, Development of critical materials involves long-term strategy planning. China has been able to succeed because it took a three-phase gradual approach with the goal-driven first one being the 10 years aimed at exploration and extraction. The Central Asian states, especially Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, are to follow the same course of action but it is necessary to focus on enhancing the resource set initially before moving on to producing and supplying value-added products and integrating the supply chain.

Conclusion

As global demand for Critical Raw Materials intensifies, exporting countries are no longer peripheral suppliers but central actors in a new geopolitical and industrial era. Yet, the mere possession of critical materials reserves is not sufficient to secure long-term development or influence. The experience of countries like China, South Africa, and Brazil demonstrates that only those nations that adopt coherent strategies, regulate their sectors effectively, and integrate into global value chains with purpose can truly benefit from their resource endowments.

Unlike consumer regions such as the EU and the United States - whose critical materials policies are centered on securing access and minimizing external dependence - exporting countries must navigate a more complex terrain. They face the dual challenge of maintaining sovereignty over strategic assets while attracting the technology, capital, and partnerships needed for development. They must simultaneously manage environmental risks, social tensions, and institutional gaps that often accompany resource exploitation.

Central Asian countries have a great amount of reserves of critical minerals, but continue operating as raw material extractors. The area experiences underdeveloped institutional coordination, weak infrastructure and few investments in technological innovations. Although the most recent efforts have been made, the pace of convergence is slow

and unequal, and there is no common strategy, but individual efforts by the countries. The Central Asian states must collaborate to all enable improvement of governance, establishing of clear national and regional interests and eventual shift to domestic processing and production, to realise maximum potential of their resources. Otherwise, the region will end up being a low-end provider in the international chain of critical materials without collaboration and medium-term perspective.

The development of the Central Asian region towards becoming a competitive actor in the area of critical raw materials has to be based on the holistic and strategic way founded on the set set of priorities and a highly dynamic form of governance. International alignment and coordination of a coherent set of policies are contingent on the development of clear critical materials definitions and the development of robust transparent institutions. A direction that China has taken step-by-step, i.e. starting with extraction of resources and then moving on to sophisticated processing of the respective material, presents an attractive option in terms of how economic diversification and value addition can be achieved. It is also noteworthy that strict environmental and social governance structures are incorporated so as to negate risks and abide by world standards. In addition to that, decreasing the excessive dependence on strong regional powers through nurturing diversified international relationships will play a crucial role towards protecting the long-term strategic interests. Taking into consideration these interdependent dimensions, the Central Asian states will be able to open up sustainable development, and upgrade their position in the global critical materials supply chains.

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Op-eds and Analysis

Critical Raw Materials as an Emerging Pillar of Central Asia's Geoeconomic Centrality

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"Centrality" has been one of the most frequently used Unique Selling Points (USPs) in political, academic, and expert discourse on and around Central Asia since the early post-Soviet period. Due to their landlocked geography and peripheral status after the end of the Cold War, Central Asian countries felt the need to assert their "centrality" in global politics. Until recently, both liberal and security political rationalities have served to articulate this centrality—whether in the nation-building and democracy-building imaginaries of the 1990s, when the transition paradigm dominated academic and policy discourse on Central Asia, or during the Global War on Terror, in which Central Asia played an important role by providing logistical support to U.S.-led international forces in Afghanistan.

With the waning of democratization expectations and the complete withdrawal of Western forces in 2021, along with the Western pivot to the Asia-Pacific—or more recently, the Indo-Pacific—the perceived centrality of the Central Asian region for the West seemed to weaken, leading to a rise in anxiety. For some observers, these developments suggested that Central Asia was neither central nor truly Asian but remained in a peripheral status.

However, Central Asia is once again becoming part of global discussions, specifically in geoeconomic and geopolitical discourse. The rise of China, global pandemics that highlighted the critical importance of supply chains, and the war in Ukraine are three factors crucially contributing to a reinvigorated interest in Central Asia on the global stage. As noted by Josep Borrell during the first EU-Central Asia Investors Forum in January 2024, "Previously, Central Asia was in the middle of nowhere, and now it is in the middle of everything."

One of the emerging topics in this context is critical raw materials (CRMs), including rare earth elements. Central Asia's potential in this sector presents an important advantage for geoeconomic alignments. According to the UNECE (2023), Central Asia has a rich and diverse mineral resource base, which includes mineable reserves of most CRMs, such as lithium, rare earth elements, and uranium. However, as Vakulchuk (2021) noted, until recently, surprisingly little attention was given to Central Asia in the global discourse on critical minerals. Things now seem to be taking off. A recent report by the U.S.-based International Tax and Investment Center (2023) highlighted the substantial potential of Central Asia in rare earth elements and its promise as a reliable supplier for the United States. While Central Asia has started to appear frequently in Western discourse, voices from the region are also joining and contributing to this narrative on the central importance of Central Asia in global supply chains of critical raw materials.

Notably, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the President of Kazakhstan, has described critical minerals as the "new oil" in an age of technological competition and urged the country to invest in developing this sector: "Developing deposits of rare and rare-earth metals, which have essentially become new oil, should be a priority task. Countries that succeed in this area will set the course for technological progress worldwide." (Tokayev, State of the Nation Address, 2023)

He brought this discourse to the UN platform, arguing that CRMs are one of the region's attractive points for global investors: "Kazakhstan will help mitigate the most immediate impacts of limited access to energy and critical raw materials caused by trade and supply chain disruptions." (Tokayev, UNGA Speech, September 2023).

Similarly, during the Tashkent Investors Forum in May 2024, Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev called on international investors to explore opportunities in Uzbekistan's critical raw materials sector: "Uzbekistan is rich in mineral resources and critical raw materials. (…) Last month, strategic cooperation in critical minerals was established with the European Union. We are also actively working with the United States and the United Kingdom to sign documents in this area.

A new Law on Subsoil will be adopted. It will be based on modern international practice. We express our gratitude to the EBRD for its assistance in this matter. We invite leading companies to Uzbekistan to implement projects on deep processing of strategic raw materials and creating high value-added chains."(Mirziyoyev, Tashkent Investors Forum, May 2024)

In practical terms, when Central Asian leaders met with President Joseph Biden in New York in September 2023, their joint statement included plans to establish the C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue, aiming to "further develop Central Asia's vast mineral wealth and advance critical minerals security." The European Union has also begun establishing CRM partnerships with Central Asian countries, notably with Kazakhstan in 2022 (Goethals, 2024) and with Uzbekistan in 2024 (European Commission, 2024). During German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's visit to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, CRMs were part of the dialogue both on a bilateral basis and within the C5+Germany format (Ostermeier, 2024).

In this context, can we consider critical raw materials as a pillar of Central Asia's "centrality" in the emerging geoeconomic landscape?

To answer this question, we need to explore several considerations and link critical raw materials to existing foundational concepts in the discourse on Central Asia.

Genealogy of the Emerging Discourse

When we examine the current enthusiasm for Central Asia as a new CRM powerhouse, it appears that this emerging discourse is closely linked to the global race for rare metals and, especially, the rivalry between the West and China. Advanced economies have entered a competition to secure access to CRMs to achieve their goals in decarbonization and technological advancement (Kalantzakos, 2020). China's dominant position in global CRM supply chains is prompting Western economies to look for alternatives (Pitron, 2022).

If we look at the current discourse on Central Asia and CRMs, we see that it derives from this global narrative on the race for critical minerals and anxieties surrounding China. Much of the current policy and expert discourse in the West presents Central Asia primarily as an alternative to China and, more specifically, as a means for the West to reduce its dependence on China. For example, a Voice of America news piece suggests that Central Asia is seen as key to breaking China's monopoly over rare earth elements (Imamova, 2024). Similarly, a CABAR.asia article refers to Central Asia's critical raw materials as the next frontier of global power rivalry (Guseinov, 2024). While it is positive that Central Asia figures prominently in global discussions on CRMs, there is also a need for critical reflection on the direction this discourse is taking and the role of knowledge networks in shaping this narrative.

Challenging the Notion of Central Asia as an Alternative to China

Depicting Central Asia in Western media as an alternative to China and as part of Western economic strategies to counter China's hegemony may lead to unrealistic expectations. As Vakulchuk (2021) already noted, China is already part of the emerging CRM ecosystem in Central Asia. China dominates the production of CRMs in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, is the main trade partner of Kazakhstan in CRMs, and is increasing its presence in Uzbekistan.

Central Asian countries' engagement with China in CRMs isn't limited to trade relationships. China has become a major actor both as a supplier of electric vehicles in Central Asia (Eurasianet, 2024) and as a key provider in developing EV infrastructure in the region (Eurasianet, 2023). Recently, Uzbekistan launched joint production of Chinese electric vehicles within the country (Gundal, 2024). This makes China an important player in developing the green economy in the region. Hence, it would be a misconception to view Central Asia as a willing partner ready to join the West in its economic rivalry with China.

Linking CRMs to Multivectorism in Central Asia

We should also link CRMs to existing approaches in Central Asian regional politics. For example, multivectorism is one of the important building blocks of Central Asian countries' engagement with the outside world. Multivectorism isn't just about foreign policy; it's also crucial for economic development. Recently, Mirzokhid Rakhimov and his colleagues have referred to multivectorism as a development tool for Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan (Rakhimov et.al. 2020). They prefer not to put all their eggs in one basket. Foreign partners are also not ready or capable of satisfying all the developmental needs of Central Asian countries.

The increasing role of China in developing the EV industry and infrastructure in Central Asia highlights this reality. Central Asian countries are interested in strengthening their cooperation with different actors to achieve their development strategies, which must consider global necessities like the green economy, decarbonization, and high-technology sectors.

From this perspective, it would be naïve to push and perpetuate the image of Central Asia as merely an alternative to China. Central Asia will continue to engage with China in CRMs. We also have to note that the current Western enthusiasm in seeing Central Asia as a preferred partner in the CRM sector could be temporary. In fact, Afghanistan appeared even earlier than Central Asia in global imaginaries around rare earth elements. A decade ago, world media reported a $1 trillion worth of critical minerals in Afghanistan (NBC News, 2015). Yet today, such discussions have largely faded from the spotlight.

Long-Term Investment and Constraints

Developing CRM infrastructure and ecosystems need decades of investment and effort. Experts point to 30–40 years of efforts by China to arrive at its current position. In this context, developing CRM infrastructure in Central Asia requires colossal long-term efforts. For this, they need inputs from more than one global funding project.

As Vladimir Norov recently argued in an op-ed in China Daily, Central Asia needs both the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the European Union's Global Gateway (Norov, 2024). We can add the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) to the same list. At the same time, they also need to address other constraints like global sanctions diplomacy, which can hinder efforts to develop the CRM ecosystem.

From this perspective, we need to extract CRMs from zero-sum logic narratives, which are mostly shaped with reference to U.S.-China global rivalry. Instead, an inclusive approach shaped by Central Asian countries themselves is essential.

Conclusions

In conclusion, CRMs are emerging as an important element in global narratives concerning Central Asia. This recent discourse, which often originates from Western perspectives (particularly in reference to China's hegemony in CRMs), is welcomed by regional actors, especially given the need to maintain the relevance of Central Asia in global politics.

However, to genuinely consider CRMs as a pillar of Central Asia's centrality in the new geoeconomic order, we must critically analyze the genealogy of this emerging discourse and understand the political rationalities behind it. We also need to delink CRMs and Central Asia from the narrow global rivalry between the West and China and the broader global race for critical minerals.

Moreover, we need to articulate Central Asia's perspective not just as a supplier but also as a consumer. Central Asian leaders have been emphasizing the need to promote a knowledge economy model and to strengthen their position in higher levels of global supply chains. They are interested in building local capacity that will enable them to participate in higher-value segments of global supply chains. This perspective calls for an inclusive approach shaped by Central Asian countries, not by external political rationalities. By doing so, Central Asia can assert its agency and ensure that the development of its critical raw materials sector serves its own long-term interests and contributes to global technological progress.

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Trump 2.0 and Central Asia: The Dilemmas of Deeper Engagement

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Introduction

Trump represents a hybrid reality that cannot be reduced to a single dimension, as he simultaneously operates as an individual dealmaker, a leader of the United States, and a disruptor of the political establishment. At his core, Trump is a transactionalist and business-minded leader, constantly seeking to maximize personal and political gains through strategic deal-making. His unpredictability is a tool, as he frequently leverages surprise and disruption to extract the best possible deals. Yet, beyond his personal ambitions, Trump also represents the institutional power of the United States, a country that sees itself as an exceptional historical experiment, bound to lead the world.

Trump's firm grip over the MAGA base and near-total control over the Republican Party will further reshape the American political landscape, making him an exceptional disruptor within the system of checks and balances. Adding to this, Trump's rise to powers also represents a political project, promoted by certain actors in American politics—such as Steve Bannon and other ideological strategists—as a tool to accelerate the demise of the existing U.S. establishment and pave the way for a radical reinvention of the country. It is all about dismantling liberalism at home and abroad, from challenging what some call the "woke system" in domestic politics to undermining U.S.-led globalism and the liberal international order. This combination of Trump's ambitions, personal authority, and his role as a project for systemic change creates a volatile mix, with significant implications both domestically and internationally. What will this entail for Central Asia?

As Trump's second presidency – Trump 2.0 – begins, pundits and experts are debating how U.S. foreign policy toward Central Asia will evolve. Some argue that Trump should adopt a new approach to the region's strategic framing, moving away from the long-standing policy of treating Central Asia as part of "South and Central Asia," a classification implemented in 2006 when the State Department shifted the region from the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs to the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. Others, particularly experts from Central Asia, advocate for stronger U.S.-Central Asia cooperation on key issues such as connectivity, critical minerals, and the Middle Corridor. These discussions merge into well-established themes that have defined U.S. policy toward Central Asia for last three decades, a policy characterized more by continuity than by major shifts, regardless of whether the White House was occupied by Trump, Biden, or Obama.

Both Washington and Central Asian governments have held well-defined mutual expectations in post-Soviet era. Central Asian states prioritize multi-vector diplomacy, aiming to balance relationships with major global powers while trying to ensure access to diverse

sources of investment, technical expertise, and political support. This strategy allows them to navigate a complex geopolitical environment, maintaining sovereignty while engaging constructively with external partners. The U.S. is viewed as an important—but not dominant—player in the region, offering investment opportunities, political backing, and knowledge-sharing initiatives. Central Asian leaders appreciate U.S. voiced support for their sovereignty.

At the same time, Central Asian governments expect their external partners, including the United States, to understand and respect their unique political and economic development paths, and growing regional significance. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States has engaged with Central Asia as a major power rather than as a superpower, acknowledging the entrenched presence of Russia and China in the region. Across both Republican and Democratic administrations, U.S. interests in Central Asia have mainly revolved around three core objectives: economic engagement, political sovereignty, and security cooperation. American companies—particularly in the energy sector—have played a significant role, with total U.S.-led investments exceeding tens of billions of dollars.

Politically, Washington has sought to uphold Central Asian sovereignty, ensuring that the region does not fall under exclusive Russian or Chinese influence—a policy that aligns with the region's own multi-vector foreign policy approach. Security concerns, particularly those related to terrorism, drug trafficking, and extremism, have also shaped U.S. engagement. However, Biden's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 marked a turning point, signaling a reduced focus on regional security concerns, a trend likely to continue under Trump 2.0.

Given this historical pattern of stable mutual political expectations, Trump 2.0's impact on Central Asia will likely follow a similar trajectory. Unlike Russia, China, or Israel, whose strategic calculations shifted immediately upon Trump's election, Central Asia has little reason for sudden shifts in mutual expectations regarding his presidency. U.S. policy toward the region—if we exclude Afghanistan and focus solely on the five post-Soviet Central Asian republics—has remained remarkably consistent across different administrations. Of course, Trump's America First ideology—which frames China as the United States' primary strategic rival—could alter this dynamic. If Trump escalates efforts to counter Beijing globally, Central Asia may emerge as a secondary theater of geopolitical competition. However, his administration is also likely to be preoccupied with domestic political struggles and more immediate international concerns, such as the Middle East, trade wars, and redefining global alliances. As a result, continuity in U.S. policy toward Central Asia is expected to prevail—at least in the early stages of Trump's second term.

The fallout of Trump 2.0 policies for Central Asia

While keeping these broad considerations on US-Central Asia relations in mind, it is also important to examine the concrete consequences and implications of Trump's second term for Central Asia. These will be analyzed through three key dimensions:

a. Trump 2.0 and Central Asia: Relative Irrelevance

If we take a broad, abstract approach and ask what Trump 2.0—both as an individual and as a collective political, business, and ideological phenomenon—immediately wants from Central Asia, the answer is quite simple: Not much.

Central Asia does not register significantly on Trump's strategic radar, nor does it factor into the high-stakes competitions that drive his administration's agenda. The region is largely absent from the key domains that define Trump's interests, whether it be the race for AI and technological supremacy, billion-dollar mega deals, or grand ideological battles shaping U.S. domestic and foreign policy. Central Asia remains a geopolitical afterthought for the major factions shaping Trump's administration—whether it's Trump himself, corporate America, the tech-political nexus represented by Musk, or the MAGA movement.

This indifference is particularly evident when examining some of Trump's major obsessions:

1. Money – Trump is fixated on securing massive investments from wealthy partners. In his first days back in office, when Saudi officials announced their plans for $600 billion investment in US economy, Trump immediately followed up by demanding they round it up to $1 trillion. This pattern is consistent with his pre-inauguration meetings, such as the moment when SoftBank's CEO pledged to invest $100 billion in the U.S., and Trump instantly pressured him to double the amount. In comparison to these staggering figures, Central Asian governments and companies barely register as economic players.

2. Building His Heroic Image – Trump views himself as America's savior, Israel's protector, and a global peacemaker deserving of the Nobel Prize. He claimed credit for a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, which was actually brokered during Biden's final days in office, and has since talked about expending the Abrahamic Accords. He has also consistently stated his intention to immediately end the Russia-Ukraine war, positioning himself as the only leader capable of resolving global conflicts. Given these ambitions, his foreign policy will remain focused on high-profile conflicts and negotiations, leaving little room for significant engagement with Central Asia.

3. Ideological Priorities – Trump's political and ideological battles are deeply rooted in the domestic U.S. culture wars and global power struggles with China. In this grand ideological map, Central Asia remains largely invisible. The region does not represent a battleground for his war on "woke culture," nor does it fit neatly into the geopolitical flashpoints that define his administration's mission. We have to note that Central Asia holds some relevance in broader China-related geopolitical and geoeconomic considerations. As China's economic presence in the region deepens, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and control over key infrastructure projects, some U.S. policymakers have sought to position Central Asia as a counterbalance to China's expanding influence. The region's large reserves of critical minerals, crucial for high-tech industries and energy security, have also drawn limited but growing attention in U.S. strategic circles. Still, when compared to Taiwan, the South China Sea, and U.S.-China trade and military tensions, Central Asia remains a secondary theater in Washington's immediate China-focused policies.

b. Central Asia as a Collateral Victim of Trump's Broader Foreign Policy Agenda

Rather than being a direct focus of Trump's second-term foreign policy, Central Asia will primarily experience the side effects of his administration's major geopolitical and ideological projects. These indirect consequences can be categorized into three key areas:

1. The Return of Great Power Politics

Trump's transactional approach to diplomacy suggests that Central Asia risks being relegated to Russia or China's sphere of influence as part of a broader geopolitical bargain. Trump's foreign policy approach has been characterized as isolationist, unilateralist and realist. From this perspective, if Trump prioritizes negotiating major deals with Moscow or Beijing, he may be willing to "let go" of Central Asia, seeing it as a distant location and low-priority bargaining chip rather than a region worth direct U.S. investment or influence-building. In practical terms, this could mean less U.S. diplomatic engagement in Central Asia, a reduction in economic initiatives, and the tacit acceptance of Russian and/or Chinese dominance in the region.

2. "America First" and the Challenge to Central Asia's Multi-Vector Diplomacy

Trump's America First doctrine is centered on reasserting U.S. global dominance and breaking China's ascent as a global superpower. If this ideological and economic power struggle extends into Central Asia, it could disrupt the region's long-cherished tradition of multi-vector diplomacy. For decades, Central Asian states have tried to carefully balance their relationships with major global powers – Washington, Moscow, and Beijing – to maximize

their strategic autonomy. However, if Trump escalates his global confrontation with China and pressures regional players to take sides, this could severely complicate Central Asia's ability to remain neutral. In such a scenario, Central Asian states may be forced to make uncomfortable choices.

3. Dismantling of the Liberal International Order

Trump's revisionist attitude toward international norms represents another potential risk for Central Asia. Trump has publicly floated radical proposals, including reclaiming Panama Canal, buying Greenland, or even absorbing Canada. While these statements may be dismissed as rhetorical provocations, they signal a broader disregard for the post-WWII international order based on sovereignty and non-interference. If Trump were to pursue any of these ambitions seriously, it would further erode the norms that protect weaker states from being absorbed or dominated by larger powers. More importantly for Central Asia, Trump's reckless behavior will further embolden similar behavior from Russia and China, undermining the principles of territorial integrity and political independence that have historically protected smaller states like those in Central Asia. For Central Asia, which relies on international law and multilateral diplomacy to balance external pressures, this trend would be deeply unsettling.

Conclusions: Navigating Trump 2.0's Potential Impact on Central Asia

While Trump's direct engagement with Central Asia may remain limited in the early stages of his second presidency, the broader shifts in global power dynamics triggered by his policies could have profound consequences for the region, creating new vulnerabilities and pressures that challenge its long-standing diplomatic strategies. If Trump 2.0 significantly extends its reach into Central Asia, it has the potential to reshape the region's traditional geopolitical balance. It could also test the region's deeply ingrained domestic and foreign policy traditions, which have historically been defined by multi-vectorism, stability, caution, and resistance to abrupt change.

However, at least in the early stages of Trump's second term, the administration will be preoccupied with domestic battles and high-priority foreign policy agendas—as outlined in previous sections. This means that continuity is likely to prevail in U.S. policy toward Central Asia, as the region remains a lower-tier concern in Trump's global strategy. Despite public discussions on the Middle Corridor, critical minerals, and connectivity, Central Asia's relative insignificance in Trump's strategic outlook could actually work in its favor, allowing the region to maintain its established relations with the U.S. with some adjustments. In particular, Central

Asian governments may adopt subtle strategies to align with Trump's style of diplomacy. This means:

• Mastering the Game of Deference – Trump expects public displays of loyalty and recognition from allies and partners. Central Asian leaders, skilled in diplomatic protocol, can leverage this expectation without making substantial strategic concessions.

• Offering Targeted Quid-Pro-Quo Deals –Small but tangible transactions, such as deals in the field of critical minerals, could help sustain favorable ties without compromising the region's strategic autonomy.

Ultimately, Central Asia's dilemma in managing its relationship with the U.S. under Trump 2.0 can be summarized as follows: Getting too close may burn you, but drifting too far could leave you in the cold. The challenge for Central Asian leaders will thus be to find the right balance, maintaining engagement without becoming entangled in Washington's shifting geopolitical calculations. Surprisingly, relations between Central Asia and the United States may receive an unexpected boost—not from high-level diplomacy under Trump 2.0, but from horizontal, lower-profile processes that go beyond specific administrations. These grassroots and commercial interactions, driven by societal and business linkages, have been steadily strengthening the foundation of U.S.-Central Asia relations, largely independent of shifts in Washington's strategic focus.

One of the most promising aspects of this evolving relationship lies in people-to-people connections.

The U.S. has recently emerged as the third-largest source of remittances for Uzbekistan, with Uzbek entrepreneurs in the U.S. investing in logistics businesses back home, creating jobs and stimulating local economic growth. Similarly, many young Central Asians are chasing their dreams in the United States: pursuing higher education in the U.S., engaging in entrepreneurial ventures, and building bridges between the two economies. Higher education is also becoming a key area of collaboration. Both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, major Central Asian countries, are actively reforming their higher education systems to compete globally, and English-language education is at the heart of this transformation. As English remains the dominant language in global science and research, deeper engagement with U.S. universities, research institutions, and technology hubs is a natural step forward.

Moreover, the growing presence of Central Asians in the U.S. presents a unique opportunity to strengthen bilateral ties through diaspora-driven engagement. These communities already contribute significantly to cultural and economic exchanges, and with the right political and administrative support, their role in shaping long-term U.S.–Central Asia

cooperation could become even more substantial. While Trump 2.0 may not prioritize Central Asia as a high-stakes geopolitical arena, these horizontal, low-profile, but high-impact linkages could quietly deepen ties between the two regions, laying the groundwork for more resilient and multifaceted engagement in the future.

Increasing Relevance of Strategic Trade Control for Central Asian Countries

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Central Asia has long been a transit region, located at the crossroads of civilizations and trade routes connecting economic powers like China, Europe, and the Middle East. Today, Central Asian countries continue to enhance their strategic importance in the evolving global trade landscape, playing an important role in establishing new trade corridors and holding vast resources amid notable geopolitical changes.

Strategic trade control (STC) has become a critical instrument of great power statecraft, shaping the global balance of economic and technological power. Leading economies are leveraging STC policies to achieve geopolitical objectives, ensuring that sensitive technologies do not fall into the hands of unauthorized actors. STC is now a dominant tool of foreign policy, expanding beyond its conventional role in national, regional and global security and non-proliferation efforts by mitigating the risks of exported items being diverted for use in weapons of mass destruction applications (Kim and Shaw, 2024). This reflects a broader trend in international relations, where economic statecraft—through economic security policies, including trade defense, foreign direct investment screenings, STC, and technology and research security—plays a central role in maintaining national security and global influence. It strives to balance security concerns with economic development.

Central Asia finds itself at the center of an increasingly restrictive political and trade environment, which in turn increases the relevance of STC for the region.

For Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, the growing significance of STC presents both challenges and opportunities. Situated between two major powers, China and Russia, both of which are increasingly at odds with the West, Central Asian nations face complex geopolitical and trade dilemmas (Sartaj, Siraj, & Ishfaq, 2018). As trade restrictions and sanctions intensify, particularly against Russia due to its ongoing war with Ukraine, and as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) further complicates this landscape, Central Asian countries must navigate an increasingly fragmented trade environment (Rolland, 2017). Managing competing interests while maintaining economic stability is a key challenge. Additionally, the membership of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) introduces further challenges, as national legislation on controlled items must align with EAEU supranational regulations and international commitments (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2017).

China's role and influence in shaping these dynamics are also significant considering the ongoing trade and tech tensions with Western countries. The United States (U.S.), European

Union (EU), the United Kingdom and Japan have tightened export controls on high-priority items, prompting China to impose restrictions on key technologies and strategic materials.

Central Asia's role in sanctions circumvention networks, particularly as a key trade hub, is becoming increasingly critical in the broader global context, placing the region at permanent risk of secondary sanctions. Striking a balance between compliance with international trade regulations and maintaining economic partnerships with both sanctioned and non-sanctioned countries is crucial, as Central Asia continues to serve as a trade corridor connecting different global markets. The ability of these countries to enhance and develop their trade control systems in response to current challenges will determine their resilience and strategic positioning within global supply chains.

Analyzing geopolitical shifts and their implications for STC in Central Asia

With these considerations in mind, it is essential to examine the concrete implications of geopolitical tensions and trade fragmentation concerning STC and its growing relevance for Central Asia. These aspects will be analyzed through two key geopolitical shifts.

The U.S.-China Tech Rivalry and Central Asia

The first is the U.S.-China tech rivalry, which has developed over the past decade as both states seek dominance in economic and technological power, including critical sectors like semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing. This rivalry intensified with China's strategic initiatives to acquire advanced technologies, often through economic espionage and state-sponsored programs like the Thousand Talents Plan. In response, the U.S. has implemented stringent export controls, sanctions, and investment restrictions to curb China's access to sensitive technologies. A significant factor in this tension is the "Made in China 2025" initiative, launched by China in 2015, which aims to dominate high-tech industries. The U.S., perceiving this as a threat, responded with tariffs and sanctions, targeting Chinese tech giants like Huawei and ZTE. The conflict escalated as the U.S. imposed export controls to restrict China's access to high-priority technologies.

In response, China has introduced its own trade controls on technologies and critical minerals, including germanium and gallium, which are crucial for advanced semiconductors and clean energy technologies. Recently, China has tightened restrictions on the movement of engineers and equipment out of the country and proposed new limits on battery technology exports and the processing of critical minerals. These measures reflect the Western tech restrictions that Beijing has previously criticized. For instance, Apple's main assembly partner

Foxconn was unable to transfer technical staff and machinery to India due to Chinese officials' interference, complicating Apple's efforts to diversify its supply chain.

The EU, Japan, and the Netherlands have taken steps to align with the U.S. on certain aspects of technology controls, particularly in the semiconductor sector. However, the extent of their participation varies, with some EU countries setting up different levels of restrictions.

The EU has also pursued its own strategy of "de-risking" its relations with Beijing. This involves tightening export controls, enhancing investment screening, and ensuring that critical technologies do not fall into the hands of competitors. As these measures intensify, the EU and the U.S. continue to balance economic interests with the imperative of maintaining technological and economic security.

This geopolitical shift between China and Western countries has significant implications for Central Asian countries, which are caught in the technological competition between China and the West.

China, through its BRI and Digital Silk Road (DSR), has already been actively investing in transport and digital infrastructure in Central Asia and has significant influence in the region. While, the U.S. and EU are wary of China's growing influence and have been promoting their own technology standards and investments through initiatives like the EU's Global Gateway and U.S. programs that focus more on security cooperation and economic development. For example, the Global Gateway initiative aims to enhance connectivity and infrastructure development in Central Asia, focusing on transport programs, digital connectivity, and energy projects. It also aims to diversify transport corridors, strengthening the Europe-Central Asia-Asia axis and reducing dependency on any single route. By doing so, the Global Gateway helps Central Asian countries integrate more deeply into the global economy while ensuring their sovereignty and economic security, benefiting both Central Asian and Western countries.

Given that U.S. policy towards Central Asian countries during the early stages of Trump's second presidency is expected to prioritize business and cultural cooperation, while the EU focuses on securing critical resources and developing new transport corridors, the region faces a complex geopolitical environment. China's willingness to transfer technology and invest heavily contrasts with the more cautious approach of the U.S. and EU, which emphasize transparency and human rights.

Sanctions on Russia, EAEU and Central Asia

The second shift relates to the sanctions imposed on Russia and their influence on Central Asian countries.

It is well known that Russia and Central Asian countries share economic interdependence and geographical proximity and remain connected through various dimensions of cooperation, including the intergovernmental military alliance in Eurasia. However, the imposition of Western sanctions on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine has significantly impacted these relationships and the region's economic dynamics.

Central Asian countries face different implications due to the sanctions against Russia and are under the constant risk of rising secondary sanctions. These sanctions have forced Central Asian countries into a delicate balancing act. While they have not formally adopted the sanctions, they have largely complied to avoid secondary sanctions. This compliance is crucial for their economic stability, as it maintains access to Western markets, advanced technologies, technology transfer, funding, technical assistance, and financial systems.

Since February 2022, Western countries have imposed numerous packages of sanctions against individuals, entities, and official government representatives of Russia. These sanctions are extensive and target various sectors, including strategic items, such as dual-use items (goods, software, and technology) that can be used for both civilian and military purposes, with the primary objective of weakening Russia's military capacity, which is expected to lead to the cessation of the war.

The EU, the U.S., and their allies have banned the sale, supply, transfer, or export, directly or indirectly, of dual-use items, including advanced technologies such as semiconductors, drones, and encryption devices. These measures aim to prevent Russia from acquiring critical components and technology that could be repurposed for military use. Despite these efforts, Russia has shown resilience by sourcing these items through third countries and so-called "black knights," countries and companies that continue to do business with Russia despite international restrictions.

Considering that Central Asian countries, particularly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, are members of the EAEU, and there are four freedoms within the customs territory of the five countries, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia, goods, services, labor, and capital can move freely within all five territories of the EAEU. The difficulty arises from the fact that once items enter the territory of the EAEU, they cannot be accurately traced. To avoid violations of secondary sanctions, Kazakhstan, for instance, has implemented a digital monitoring system to track items crossing its borders with EAEU neighboring countries. This online system was launched in April 2023 to demonstrate Kazakhstan's commitment to adhering to the restrictions measures.

Concerns about the circumvention of sanctions have been related to the notable increase in the trade of dual-use items, with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, in particular, seeing significant rises in the import and re-export of such items to Russia. In response, Western countries have added provisions to sanctions legislation to address circumvention routes. Central Asian countries, considered sensitive, started to attract more attention within trade control, with several entities from the region already being sanctioned.

This has also led to increased scrutiny and diplomatic pressure on Central Asian countries to ensure they do not become conduits for sanctioned items. For instance, the EU has intensified its diplomatic engagement with Central Asia. High-level visits and summits have been held to strengthen cooperation and ensure compliance with international sanctions regimes.

Trade control systems in Central Asia

Before considering the relevance of STC for Central Asian countries in alignment with geopolitical shifts, it is essential to provide a brief overview of the current status of STC systems in the countries.

Based on the publicly available Peddling Peril Index 2023/2024, which, despite discussions around its methodology, provides an overview of trade control systems and a general understanding of the current status of trade controls in Central Asian countries.

Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's STC legislation is ranked in the Dark Green category, meaning that the legislation is comprehensive and includes controls or clauses relating to the export of nuclear direct-use and nuclear dual-use goods and conventional weapons. For instance, Kazakhstan has shown a commitment to strengthening its export control system, notably through the enactment of the updated law "On Control of Specific Goods" in 2023, which includes new provisions such as extraterritorial mediation services (brokering) and technical assistance, while lacking cyber surveillance and human rights clauses.

In turn, Tajikistan's and Uzbekistan's legislation is ranked as Light Green, meaning the legislation is somewhat comprehensive and includes controls or clauses relating to the export of nuclear direct-use goods in addition to conventional weapons. Turkmenistan, however, has legislation with serious deficiencies, which can be explained by the absence of separate and autonomous legislation on export control.

Thus, Central Asian countries have varying levels of trade controls and some weaknesses that highlight vulnerabilities in trade. This is why it is crucial for these countries to

enhance regulatory frameworks, keep control lists up to date, and strengthen enforcement to address emerging technologies, human rights, and cyber surveillance challenge.

Importance of STC in Central Asia

The rising significance of STCs in Central Asian nations, shaped by recent geopolitical shifts, can be examined from various angles.

To begin with, compliance with trade control and sanctions regulations, alongside international commitments, is vital. The U.S., EU, and other global powers impose stringent measures, and non-compliance can lead to severe penalties, including imprisonment. This creates significant challenges for Central Asian nations, such as supply chain disruptions and restricted access to advanced technologies. Given their role as both exporters of strategic goods and importers of dual-use technologies, these countries must strengthen their trade control mechanisms.

In addition, Central Asia's strategic position as a global trade hub makes effective trade control measures essential. Adhering to diverse national, regional, and international regulations facilitates legitimate trade while mitigating the risk of sensitive goods being diverted to unauthorized entities. Strengthening these controls enhances regional stability and fosters trust with international trading partners.

Another key factor is the region's multi-vector foreign policy, which requires balancing trade practices among major powers like Russia, China, the EU, and the U.S., as well as Türkiye and Iran. Successfully navigating complex international trade regulations helps maintain regional stability, prevent proliferation, and curb illicit trade activities.

Furthermore, investing in capacity building and technical expertise is crucial for effective trade control implementation. Strengthening these capabilities not only builds a trustworthy global reputation but also opens doors to international cooperation and technical assistance. Support from donor countries provides critical resources and expertise.

At the same time, the risks of academic proliferation demand heightened scrutiny over research collaborations, particularly with China and Russia. A multi-vector approach, while beneficial, can also create vulnerabilities in economic, technological, and research security, especially in relation to Western policies. Strengthening safeguards against academic proliferation reinforces regional and global stability.

Equally important is the role of businesses engaging in international trade. Companies must navigate an increasingly complex landscape of trade controls and sanctions, making internal compliance programs indispensable. Despite regulatory challenges, Central Asian

countries remain active players in global trade, and awareness campaigns and collaborative initiatives can drive innovative solutions for compliance.

Moreover, the rise of emerging technologies, cyber surveillance, and human rights concerns necessitates continuous adaptation. Trade control frameworks must stay updated and responsive to evolving global challenges to remain effective.

Beyond risk mitigation, STCs also present opportunities. Compliance-driven strategies enable trade diversification, access to new markets, and institutional capacity building. Strengthened regulations enhance credibility, attract global partners, and reduce reliance on limited trade routes, positioning the region as a stronger global player.

Finally, enhanced regional cooperation and intelligence sharing among Central Asian countries can significantly improve the effectiveness of trade controls. Establishing regional dialogue platforms fosters collaboration, helps tackle common challenges, and facilitates coordinated enforcement efforts, ultimately leading to a more robust and cohesive trade control system.

As Central Asia stands at the crossroads of global trade and geopolitics, its approach to STCs will shape its economic future. The region faces a crucial decision: align with Western regulations, maintain neutrality, or forge an independent path. How these nations navigate these challenges will not only define their trade policies but also determine their standing in the global economy.

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Understanding Central Asia's Position on Northern Cyprus: Between Principles, Pressures, and Pragmatism

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The case of Northern Cyprus has unexpectedly become a focal point of debate following the Central Asia–EU Summit held in Samarkand on 4 April 2025. The final declaration of the summit endorsed the EU's position on Cyprus, grounded in UN Security Council Resolutions 541 and 550. This development followed the gradual diplomatic outreach of several Central Asian states toward the Republic of Cyprus, beginning in 2024, through the accreditation of ambassadors. These developments sparked a strong backlash in Turkiye, where media and some political figures accused Central Asian countries of betraying their brotherly Turkic nations.

It is especially timely to reflect on this issue on the eve of the upcoming extraordinary informal OTS summit, to be held in Budapest on 20–21 May 2025. Convened for the first time in an observer state, and held under the theme "Meeting point of East and West", the Budapest summit draws attention not only as a moment to showcase the OTS's ability to shape timely agendas and assert its presence on the international stage, but also as an opportunity to assess the internal cohesion of the organization at a time when emerging divergences—such as differing positions on Northern Cyprus—require careful navigation.

This episode calls for a thorough analytical approach—both to understand why Central Asian countries aligned themselves with the EU position, and to situate this alignment within the broader geopolitical context that shapes Central Asia's stance on Northern Cyprus, its evolving regional partnerships, and its complex relationship with Turkiye.

The Positive Momentum of Central Asia–Turkiye Relations Put to the Test

In recent years, the strengthening of both Central Asia–Turkiye and broader Turkic world relations have been among the positive outcomes of the shifting global geopolitical landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the emergence of connectivity as an alternative to traditional globalization have all contributed to the intensification of ties. The West's renewed appreciation of Turkiye's and Central Asia's growing strategic value has further invigorated these relations. The institutional strengthening of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), the deepening Turkiye–Azerbaijan strategic alliance, and Ankara's renewed engagement with Central Asia have all been part of this positive trend.

This was a much welcome development in a world increasingly marked by instability and unrest—corresponding to the interests of Central Asian countries and Turkiye alike . It is compatible with UN norms, beneficial for cooperation with Western partners, and not perceived

as threatening by major powers like Russia or China. But then the question of Northern Cyprus began to test it.

The latest episode, the Samarkand Declaration of 2025, became a flashpoint. Its language affirming support for Cyprus's territorial integrity provoked a strong reaction in parts of the Turkish political establishment and media. To understand what caused this and how to address it, we must take a closer look.

Northern Cyprus and the Fragility of Turkic Cooperation

At the EU–Central Asia Summit in Samarkand on April 4, 2025, the leaders of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan met with top EU officials (António Costa, President of the European Council and von der Leyen, President of the European Commission). The resulting Joint Declaration marked a major diplomatic milestone– not only upgrading EU–Central Asia relations to a "strategic partnership," but also containing a quietly significant paragraph on the Cyprus question. In Paragraph 4 of the Samarkand Declaration, the Central Asian states and the EU "reaffirmed [their] strong commitment" to United Nations Security Council Resolutions 541 and 550 (1983/84) on Cyprus. They also emphasized that "engagement in regional cooperation frameworks should fully respect these international principles (i.e. principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity mentioned in the beginning of Paragraph 4), which remain essential to the enhancement of EU-Central Asia relations". Those UNSC resolutions in fact explicitly condemn the TRNC's unilateral declaration of independence as legally invalid and call on all states "not to recognize" any Turkish Cypriot state on the island. By endorsing this language, the Central Asian leaders – which included the four Turkic republics of which three are full members and one is observer member of OTS – essentially signed onto the thesis that the Republic of Cyprus is the island's only legitimate government.

Turkish pundits and some politicians have since been criticizing the Central Asian republics for siding with Cyprus (the Greek Cypriot government) over their "brotherly" Turkic partner. Some pundits in Turkey went so far as to declare that "Central Asia betrayed Turkic unity" and that "Erdoğan lost in foreign policy" over this issue.

To understand the origins of this situation and to account for behavior of Central Asian countries at Samarkand Summit, we have to look to earlier developments. Before the 2025 Samarkand EU–Central Asia Summit, there was the 2022 OTS Summit in Samarkand—where Northern Cyprus was granted observer status in the OTS. At the time, then–Foreign Minister

Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu hailed this step as a historic moment in bringing Turkic states closer together.

To understand the origins of this situation and to account for the behavior of Central Asian countries at the Samarkand Summit, we have to look at earlier developments. Before the 2025 Samarkand EU–Central Asia Summit, there was the 2022 OTS Summit in Samarkand—where Northern Cyprus was granted observer status in the OTS. At the time, then–Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu hailed this step as a historic moment in bringing Turkic states closer together.

This move triggered an immediate reaction from the EU and set the stage for subsequent developments in Central Asian attitudes toward Northern Cyprus. In the months following this decision, a quiet counterbalancing trend began to take shape.

Already in the lead-up to the 2022 OTS Samarkand Summit, EU officials had issued warnings to Central Asian governments about the potential negative diplomatic consequences of granting such status to what they referred to as a "secessionist entity." In a Euractiv article published in September 2022, a senior EU official warned that recognizing or legitimizing the Turkish Cypriot administration could "negatively affect" EU relations with the Central Asian states, hinting that decisions taken within the OTS framework might carry repercussions for their cooperation with Europe.

Just days before the summit, EU High Representative Josep Borrell issued a strongly worded statement, calling the initiative an "attempt to legitimise the Turkish Cypriot secessionist entity" and reminding OTS members that such steps were in direct contradiction with UN Security Council Resolutions 541 and 550. This provoked an immediate and sharply critical response from Turkiye. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement rejecting the EU's position and denouncing Borrell's remarks as "detached from realities" and a "reflection of the EU's habitual bias" on the Cyprus issue. Ankara emphasized that granting observer status to the TRNC was a sovereign decision by the OTS, based on the shared Turkic identity of its members, and that such steps did not require "permission" or "approval" from Brussels. In a Daily Sabah article, Çavuşoğlu insisted, "We do not need anyone's approval. The TRNC is a Turkic state, and it has every right to be present among the Turkic world." The OTS stood by its decision, welcoming Northern Cyprus as an observer member. The Samarkand Declaration included Point 7, in which member states stated: "Consider Turkish Cypriots as part of the Turkic World and welcome TRNC's OTS Observer Status."

The situation took a different turn when Central Asian countries began taking steps now in line with the EU position on the Cyprus question. From 2024 onwards, Central Asian

countries began upgrading their diplomatic relations with the Republic of Cyprus. Uzbekistan was the first to move, followed by Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan—all formally accrediting their ambassadors to the Republic of Cyprus. In parallel with establishing diplomatic ties, several Central Asian republics also expressed interest in strengthening economic cooperation with the Republic of Cyprus. Uzbekistan launched a bilateral business association during its ambassador's accreditation visit in 2024, while Kazakhstan highlighted growing trade and investment flows—worth over $227 million—and explored the possibility of direct flights.

Central Asia's Consistent Commitment to Territorial Integrity as Defined by the UN framework

Central Asian countries have long adhered consistently and formally to the principle of territorial integrity as codified in the UN Charter and UN resolutions. For them, this principle is not just normative—it is existential. Their borders, shaped during the Soviet collapse, are maintained today thanks largely to international recognition under the UN system. Given their geographic proximity to stronger neighbors like China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan, they rely on the inviolability of borders for domestic and regional stability. Strict respect for the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity is both an essential condition for stable regional order in Central Asia but also a starting point to engage with world nations.

For this reason, the principle of territorial integrity as codified in UN documents has consistently taken precedence over regional or ideological affiliations. For example, Kazakhstan has consistently supported Azerbaijan's territorial integrity by recognizing Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan in line with international law and UN resolutions, despite being in the same CSTO alliance as Armenia. Similarly, Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries have refused to recognize Crimea, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, or other separatist regions—even while maintaining close ties with Russia.

Northern Cyprus falls within this same category. The TRNC has been the subject of clear UN Security Council resolutions that define its unilateral declaration of independence as legally invalid. For Central Asian states, aligning with these resolutions is not a rejection of Northern Cyprus or Turkiye—it is a continuation of a foreign policy line they have followed consistently for more than thirty years, that of adhering to and referring to the United Nations on these matters. This stance is not emotional; it is calculated and also necessitated by their own concerns for stability and order in Central Asia. You can call it path dependence, a discourse trap, or legal inertia—but it is firmly rooted in state interest. Their geopolitical realities differ from those of Turkiye and the TRNC.

It seems even the Turkish leadership understands this now. Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan's post-summit remarks were measured and carefully calibrated. On the one hand, he acknowledged the reasoning behind the Central Asian states' decisions, describing their actions in the Cyprus context as "understandable" given the growing attention they are receiving from global actors, including the European Union. At the same time, however, Fidan criticized what he saw as the EU's attempts to exploit these developments to sow division within the Turkic world. He emphasized Turkiye's continued commitment to the ideal of Turkic unity, affirming that Ankara would remain aligned with the broader vision of the Turkic world. He also warned against attempts to provoke public discord among Turkic states, stating, "As a matter of principle, we prefer not to discuss family matters in public."

The EU Factor—Leveraging Engagement and Investment

Another important factor behind the Central Asian position is the European Union. The EU was overtly frustrated by the 2022 decision to grant the TRNC observer status in the OTS. Since then, Brussels has actively worked to reassert its position, using both diplomacy and incentives.

The EU remains a vital partner for Central Asia, offering not only investment and development funding but also international legitimacy and access to the global market. Central Asia's multi-vector foreign policy depends heavily on maintaining relations with all major powers. As global conditions become less favorable for small and medium powers practicing balancing acts, the EU has become even more important.

Significant developments are currently shaping the trajectory of Central Asia–EU relations. The European Union has been actively courting the region through its Global Gateway strategy, positioning itself as a strategic partner by offering connectivity, investment, and development opportunities. Among the most tangible signs of progress is the ongoing negotiation of an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) between the EU and Uzbekistan, with both sides expressing hope that the agreement will be signed by the end of 2025. A similar process is underway with Tajikistan, while Kazakhstan has entered into discussions with the EU on visa facilitation—an issue of growing relevance for people-to-people contacts and mobility.

Perhaps most notably, during the Samarkand Summit in April 2025, the EU pledged €12 billion in regional investments, to consolidate its freshly announced 'strategic partnership' with Central Asia. These high-level, high-stakes negotiations—and the broader deepening of EU–Central Asia engagement—likely influenced Central Asian states' recalibrated approach

to the Cyprus issue: initially agreeing to Northern Cyprus's observer status in the OTS in 2022, but subsequently counterbalancing that move by upgrading diplomatic ties with the Republic of Cyprus and ultimately endorsing the EU and UN position in the 2025 Samarkand Declaration.

The Future of the OTS — Prioritizing Functionality and Mutual Interests Over Polarizing Issues

On the eve of the extraordinary summit of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), convened in Budapest on 20–21 May at the initiative of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, it is timely to reflect not only on Central Asia's position regarding Northern Cyprus, but also on what has made the OTS successful in recent years.

The OTS has achieved the most when it has focused on functional cooperation—areas such as transport connectivity, trade facilitation, education, and cultural exchange. This pragmatic, technical agenda has proven inclusive and productive, aligning with the priorities and capacities of all member states. A clear example of this is the OTS's commitment to enhancing the "Middle Corridor" through the Agreement on International Combined Freight Transportation, signed during the 2021 Istanbul Summit. This agreement aims to streamline administrative procedures, reduce logistical barriers, and integrate road, rail, and maritime routes across the region. Similarly, trade facilitation has progressed through the establishment of a "Simplified Customs Corridor," signed in Samarkand in 2022 which aims to simplify cross-border trade procedures and boosts intra-regional commerce. At the Astana Summit in November 2023, the OTS further reinforced this functional orientation by adopting an agenda centered on capacity-building in transport, trade, investment, digitalization, and sustainability—areas that reflect shared development goals rather than divisive political narratives. These initiatives, often supported through cooperation with international organizations such as UN agencies, highlight the OTS's strength as a platform for functional cooperation. By contrast, efforts to politicize the organization or transform it into a geopolitical or ideological bloc risk undermining the delicate cohesion it currently enjoys.

The reality is that while Turkiye, Azerbaijan, and the Central Asian republics share many cultural values and long-term interests, they also sometimes face diverging geopolitical pressures and domestic considerations. Central Asian countries, in particular, are shaped by political cultures that emphasize prudence, balance, and non-confrontation. This is evident in their engagement in multilateral platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), their cautious posture within the CSTO, and now, clearly, in their approach to the Northern

Cyprus issue. If the OTS were to be drawn into more confrontational or unilateral postures, it would likely provoke discomfort and even resistance from its Central Asian members. The Cyprus issue is illustrative in this regard: while its symbolic relevance to Turkic solidarity is acknowledged, its resolution—if and when it comes—will most likely occur through multilateral processes under the framework of the United Nations, not through regional political maneuvers.

Moreover, Central Asian governments are trying navigate a rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape marked by intensifying great-power rivalries: China vs. the United States, Russia vs. the West, and an increasingly geopolitical European Union. These dynamics place considerable external pressure on the region and force its leaders to prioritize flexibility, strategic hedging, and international legitimacy. In this context, the Cyprus issue, while not dismissed, ranks low on their list of urgent concerns.

Respecting the logic of Central Asian foreign policy will help maintain the larger project of Turkic cooperation—one that must be flexible enough to accommodate different positions, and strong enough to keep functioning despite them.

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Hydropolitics in Central Asia: Balancing Tensions and Good Neighbourliness in Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan Water Relations

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In an era marked by accelerating climate change and heightened global instability, water security has increasingly become a prominent concern, particularly in Central Asia. Many observers warn that competition over scarce water resources could escalate into open conflict within the region in the coming decades. The unique nature of water allocation in Central Asia—deeply intertwined with economic development, political dynamics, and energy security—makes water management a sensitive factor in interstate relations. Nevertheless, rather than defaulting toward confrontation, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan carefully navigate between two dominant narratives in their water-related discourses: prioritizing agricultural needs and emphasizing good neighborliness. These narratives create space for cooperation and temporary accommodation, enabling both states to effectively manage recurring tensions surrounding shared water resources.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan occupy contrasting positions in Central Asia's water geography. Kazakhstan as a downstream state heavily reliant on transboundary water, and Kyrgyzstan as an upstream country endowed with abundant water resources. Despite this asymmetry, both states strategically frame their water discourse around agriculture and consistently emphasize principles of "good neighborliness." By using these shared narratives, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan effectively depoliticize water-related issues, thus helping to manage and alleviate tensions. Furthermore, the narratives reflect broader power dynamics: Kyrgyzstan tends to leverage its upstream advantage to strengthen its negotiating position, whereas Kazakhstan frequently relies on administrative and diplomatic tools. This op-ed examines precisely how these two narratives interact within the bilateral discourse, asking: How do Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan manage their water-resource tensions through competing yet complementary narratives?

Shared Rivers Separated Path

The Central Asian region presents a complex water landscape, particularly between upstream Kyrgyzstan and downstream Kazakhstan. The region's water resoucres are formed through mountain glaciers in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and two main rivers: Syr Darya and Amu Darya (see Map). Particularly, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan share Shu and Talas rivers originating from Kyrgyzstan's mountain glaciers. Although both states rely on shared Shu and Talas rivers for agricultural purposes such as cultivating water-intensive rice, cotton, and beets, they differ significantly in their economy, resources availability and strategic needs. Kazakhstan, a resource-rich downstream country, is highly dependent on transboundary

inflows, with nearly 50% of its water sourced from neighboring states. Contrastly, Kyrgyzstan, a mountainous upstream state, generates almost all of its water domestically and holds 45% of Central Asia's glacier reserves, however, lacking Kazakhstan's energy reserves and economic scale. Despite these geographical contrasts, both nations suffer from similar water-sector challenges: outdated infrastructure, inefficient irrigation, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and the growing effects of climate change. However, their respective discourses around water diverge sharply: Kazakhstan emphasizes water as a shared and scarce regional resource, while Kyrgyzstan—lacking in fossil fuel reserves—as a national asset or treasure that can be monetized as a commodity, a narrative that has developed since the collapse of the USSR and treats water as a resource of economic value.

Water relations between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan trace back to the Soviet era, when a centrally coordinated water-energy nexus governed the exchange of water for energy resources between upstream and downstream states during winter-summer period. Following the USSR's collapse and the introduction of market reforms, this arrangement ended, transforming domestic rivers into international ones and complicating resource management. Today, bilateral relations are regulated through the 2000 Agreement on the Chu and Talas Rivers, praised as a model of cooperation. According to earlier Soviet regulations, the Talas River is shared equally, while Kazakhstan receives 42% and Kyrgyzstan 58% of the Chu River (1983 Agreements). Despite formal frameworks, inherited Soviet-era mismanagement, that led to the Aral Sea disaster, continues to undermine effective water governance. Furthermore, mutual distrust, upstream-downstream competition, authoritarian governance styles, growing population and climate pressures exacerbate tensions, hindering collaboration. Scholars thus stress the urgent need for improved regional cooperation and proactive water governance.

Hydropolitics: Explaining Politics through Water

To analyze the water dynamics of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan the concept of hydropolitics is applicable. Hydropolitics is a multidisciplinary concept that examines the interplay of politics, geography, and society in managing and governing water resources, particularly in transboundary contexts. While it lacks a single, unified definition, scholars generally agree that hydropolitics involves both state and non-state actors — such as international organizations and civil society — and extends beyond water itself including issues like agriculture, food security, ecosystems, and even gender. Hydropolitics manifests in physical infrastructure like dams and institutional tools like treaties. Most importantly, hydropolitics is deeply embedded in discourse — how states construct and communicate water

narratives — which reflects underlying power asymmetries. Discourse analysis, therefore, is essential to understand how states like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan practice water diplomacy and negotiate their interests through language. The hydropolitics concept is relevant for Kazakh-Kyrgyz water relations as it helps to analyze intricate dynamics between states, how state and non-state actors, power dynamics, and non-water related agriculture and good neighborliness narratives may shape the water relations between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, hydropolitics with emphasis on discourse analysis will be shown through two cases of tension between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that involved water resources. Cases show that states tend to use their resources to leverage each other, Kazakhstan uses administrative barriers in the form of border restrictions to stop Kyrgyz good transition through Kazakh borders, while Kyrgyzstan leverages water as a way to pressure Kazakhstan.

Narratives in Practice

2017: Personal Quarrel between Nazarbayev and Atambayev

This case shows the role of individuals, in the form of personal relations between heads of states, can affect hydropolitics. In 2017 triggered by Nazarbayev's meeting with Kyrgyz presidential candidate Omurbek Babanov — perceived by Atambayev as interference in Kyrgyzstan's internal affairs — led to Atambayev publicly criticizing Nazarbayev, and Kazakhstan imposing administrative and border restrictions as response. The conflict escalated with the exchange of harsh diplomatic statements, and Atambayev went as far as threatening to cut off the water supply from the shared Shu and Talas Rivers, echoing a similar case of border restrictions and water stoppage in 2010. This incident demonstrates how water becomes both a tool and symbol of political leverage during interstate disputes.

A central theme in this case is the instrumentalization of water in political rhetoric, particularly from the Kyrgyz side. It marks a shift in Kyrgyz official discourse, openly acknowledging water as a tool of leverage and describing Kazakh border restrictions as a "blockade", Kazakhstan's tool of leverage. Atambayev admitted using water to pressure Kazakhstan: "When I turned off the water for two days, they immediately reopened the borders. There are 2.5 months left until spring [referring to 2010 case]" (Когда я на 2 дня вырубил воду – сразу открыли границы. До весны осталось 2,5 месяца) and framed the border closure as a blockade, referring to past conflicts as repeated blockades: "Kazakhstan put us under blockade", "these six years are two blockades [referring to 2010 case]". This rhetoric frames a Kyrgyz official narrative emphasizing Kazakhstan's dependence on Kyrgyz water resources. This narrative of water dependency is largely tied to agricultural needs, as both

countries depend on shared rivers for irrigation. Kyrgyz media claimed that "almost 90 percent" of water from the shared rivers is used for Kazakh agricultural needs. This reflects a continuing narrative in Central Asian hydropolitics where water is primarily associated with only agriculture and is crucial for downstream countries like Kazakhstan. The framing of water as essential for agricultural survival reinforces its value and politsize it.

In contrast, Kazakhstan responded with a narrative emphasizing shared responsibility and legal commitments, portraying water as a common resource managed through regional cooperation. Both Kazakh media and official discourses used a narrative of water being a shared resource: "There is no provision for water to be sold" (Нет такого положения, чтобы воду продавали.), "We share the water, there is no charge for it" (Мы делим воду, никакой платы за нее нет). To support this narrative, both media and official sources stressed that water is not sold and pointed to historical and international agreements, to emphasize compliance with the established legal frameworks. This demonstrates the continuity of Kazakh discourse treating water as a common regional priority and frame water within institutional cooperation, and resist the Kyrgyz narrative of dependency and unfair distribution.

Despite the escalated rhetoric, both sides in official discourse of responsible government bodies still continue to use the "good neighborliness" narrative as a counterbalance to political tensions between head of states. Kazakh officials claimed that water from the Kirov reservoir would be released gradually: "They will drain gradually, they are not enemies" (Спускать они будут постепенно, не враги же) claiming that repairs at the Kirov reservoir, and border restrictions were not connected. This narrative of "good-relations" helps to balance out the political tension between head of states and "agricultural-as-a-main-concern" narrative in an attempt to maintain a baseline of regional cooperation.

Moreover, the case shows how hydropolitics can be extended into broader geopolitical narratives, drawing Uzbekistan's water interests: "then this will also affect the interests of Uzbekistan" (то это затронет также и интересы Узбекистана) and Russia and EAEU dynamics, positioning the water dispute within a larger framework of regional economic and political integration. This illustrates how water issues of even two states may be linked with the regional security, economic and political dimension of the whole region.

In conclusion, the 2017 Nazarbayev-Atambayev dispute reveals how hydropolitics is not just about water, but also a reflection of broader political relationships. Water, particularly through the lens of agricultural dependency, becomes a strategic resource in disputes, but is also mitigated by narratives of shared responsibility through legal commitments and "good-relations" narratives. The good neighborliness discourse serves as a critical mechanism to

prevent escalation, illustrating the dual role of water in Central Asia as both a source of tension and a foundation for cooperation.

2023: Zhambyl Drought

During the drought period in summer in 2023, both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan experienced water scarcity due to high temperature that affected the agricultural sector and led to economic cost. In July, facing critical crop risk, Kazakhstan signed an agreement with Kyrgyzstan to increase water supply, which helped preserve 99% of the harvest, according to Kazakh officials but led to downstream shortages in August. This contributed to a drought in Zhambyl oblast, where a state of emergency was declared, crop failure, social unrest, and as result Kazakhstan's imposition of border restrictions on Kyrgyzstan. This episode triggered intense discourse on both sides, dominated by the "agriculture-as-a-main-concern" narrative, which framed the crisis as a threat to food security.

While overall, Kazakh discourse had a blaming tone towards Kyrgyzstan accusing it for the water shortage, Kyrgyz side had a justifying tone in response to accusations. So, Kazakh media adopted a blaming tone, accusing Kyrgyzstan of failing to provide sufficient water, using emotional and crisis-laden language: "acute water shortage", "critical water situation", "serious shortage of irrigation water", "actually does not receive a drop from the neighboring republic".

In contrast, Kyrgyz officials emphasized their own shortages and justified water delivery limits, underscoring mutual agricultural vulnerability. Kyrgyz official discourse, beside emphasizing that the Kazakh side knew the possible consequences of overusing the limit in July, also used the water shortage narrative: "…but there is no water. If there was, we would give it. We also need a lot of water, but if there is no water, what should we do now?" (…но воды же нет. Была бы – мы бы дали. Нам тоже много воды надо, но если нет воды, что теперь делать?).

Notably, while both Kazakh and Kyrgyz media tended to connect the water shortage and border restrictions, in contrast Kazakh and Kyrgyz officials in this case were trying to avoid politicization of the water shortage. In order to lower the level of tensions over water despite Kazakhstan's imposition of restrictions, official rhetoric continued to emphasize "good neighborly" and "brotherly" relations, balancing the conflict narrative with cooperative undertones. For instance, Kazakh official discourse had a more reserved tone, admitting to signing the document in order to lower the tension between two states on a water basis.

This case also introduced a growing use of the ecology narrative, linking the drought to climate change and culminating in structural reforms in Kazakhstan, such as the creation of a

new Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation in Kazakhstan showing the growing importance of water management amid climate change conditions. Additionally, this case also shows the way of Kazakhstan to use border restrictions to "punish" Kyrgyzstan for water shortage or pressure it to increase water supply, representing the power dynamics of their bilateral relations. Ultimately, the crisis reveals how the agricultural narrative alone could escalate tensions especially in intensive drought periods, but is moderated by persistent attempts of a good relations narrative at least from the official side, keeping the conflict within manageable bounds and reinforcing the importance of balancing.

Balancing on Tightrope with Two Narratives, But for How Long?

Thus, two seemingly opposing narratives, agriculture-driven urgency and good neighborly diplomacy, in practice show that these narratives help states to balance out their tensions much like walking a tightrope. The interplay between the two dominant narratives—"agriculture-as-a-main-concern" and "good neighborliness"—reveals a dynamic in which the potential for conflict, driven by competing agricultural needs and water scarcity, is mitigated by a specific emphasis on maintaining good neighborly, bilateral ties. While the agriculture narrative alone could escalate tensions by framing water solely as a contested resource, that raises food security and economic cost issues, the parallel with the good neighborliness narrative functions as a diplomatic balancing, helping to de-escalate disputes and sustain cooperation at least temporarily.

It shows that despite many saying that the Central Asian region will face armed conflict over water resources in upcoming ages, they tend to mitigate tensions through narratives, driven by a mutual understanding of their interdependence. Kazakhstan relies on water supply from Kyrgyzstan, while the latter relies on goods transitioning through Kazakhstan borders' to Russia. This analysis also reveals how power dynamics is manifested through hydropolitics, with states leveraging their geographical positions and resources dependencies as a leverage to pressure each other in critical situations.

However, these crises show lack of regulations or interstate bodies to resolve water issues between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Despite tension over water resources since independence in the 1990s, no crisis mitigation framework or interstate body for managing such disputes has been established. Nevertheless, the increasing global climate challenges — including global warming, glacier melting, and water pollution — will most likely worsen the situation and threaten stability in the region, leading to more severe crises with water shortages, creating a moment when these two narratives will no longer help to balance the tension.

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Annexes

Middle Powers in the Midst of Great Power Rivalries: the Case of Kazakhstan

Daiana Aitmurzina

Appendix A
Profile of the participants

Participants	Affiliation	Years of Experience
Interviewee 1	Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (KazISS)	9 years
Interviewee 2	Analytical Research Center "Eurasian Monitoring"	Not provided
Interviewee 3	Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (KazISS)	20 years
Interviewee 4	L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University	13-14 years
Interviewee 5	Turkic Academy	20 years
Interviewee 6	The European Governance Lab; Korea Institute for International Economic Policy	5 years

| Interviewee 7 | Zhibek Zholy TV channel as an expert on foreign policy | 20 years |
| Interviewee 8 | Department of Public Policy at Nazarbayev University | Over 5 years |

Appendix B

Interview questions

Themes	Questions	Follow-up questions
Professional background	1. What is your current professional affiliation and position? 2. How many years of experience do you have in the field of international relations, foreign policy, or Central Asian studies?	-
Expert perspective and theoretical framing	3. Based on your professional experience, how would you define a "middle power" in today's international system? 4. Do you believe Kazakhstan qualifies as a middle power?	3. Which criteria (e.g., economic capability, diplomatic activism, regional influence) are most essential in your view? 4. How does it compare to classical or emerging middle

	Why or why not?	powers?
	5. Which international relations theory - neoclassical realism, liberalism, or constructivism - do you find most useful in analyzing Kazakhstan's foreign policy behavior?	
Foreign policy strategy	6. How would you describe Kazakhstan's foreign policy approach toward Russia, China, and the United States?	6. Do you see consistent balancing, hedging, or a shift in alignment over time?
	7. What are the key enablers of Kazakhstan's strategic autonomy?	7. What are the most serious constraints?
	8. How do domestic factors - such as leadership preferences, bureaucratic capacity, or elite consensus - shape Kazakhstan's foreign policy decision-making?	
	9. Is Kazakhstan's multi-vector	

	foreign policy still an effective strategy in the current geopolitical climate?	
Regional engagement and soft power	10. How has Kazakhstan sought to project influence through soft power - such as cultural diplomacy, education, mediation, or international initiatives (e.g., Astana peace talks, CICA)? 11. In regional organizations such as the SCO, EAEU, and CICA, do you see Kazakhstan as an agenda-setter or more of a rule-taker? 12. What is Kazakhstan's role in the Central Asian region, in your view?	10. Which efforts have been most successful? 11. How does it position itself within these institutions?
External pressures and strategic responses	13. How has Kazakhstan adjusted its foreign policy in response to recent global developments?	14. Are there any efforts to diversify these dependencies?

	14. How do economic dependencies - on trade, investment, or infrastructure - from major powers affect Kazakhstan's foreign policy options?	
Comparative reflections and future outlook	15. Compared to other middle powers (e.g. Indonesia, South Korea, or Türkiye), how would you evaluate Kazakhstan's approach to navigating great power rivalries? 16. What strategic or diplomatic tools should Kazakhstan prioritize in order to enhance its status as a middle power and protect its interests in a multipolar world? 17. What potential trajectories might Kazakhstan's foreign policy take in the near to medium term?	15. What are the key differences or similarities?

Final reflections	18. What areas of Kazakhstan's foreign policy or role as a middle power remain underexplored in academic or policy research?	-

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

Middle powers in the midst of great power rivalries: the case of Kazakhstan

Researchers: Daiana Aitmurzina (Bachelor's Student in International Relations), Nurzhanat Ametbek (Supervisor)

Thank you for your participation in our research! This study aims to examine the role of middle powers in the context of great power competition, with a focus on Kazakhstan.

In this study, you will be asked to answer a set of questions about your perspectives on international governance, foreign policy, and the strategies of middle powers. This process will take approximately 20 minutes.

Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time, for any reason, by informing the researcher. You are also free to skip any questions you prefer not to answer. (Note: Mandatory questions have been pre-approved by the Committee.). This research study does not offer any monetary compensation or fees for participation.

Data Privacy:

Fully Anonymous Data. This study is fully anonymous. Your participation is completely confidential. Once your responses are provided, they cannot be linked to your identity and therefore cannot be withdrawn or deleted after participation.

With your explicit permission, the interview may be audio-recorded or the Zoom meeting may be recorded. These recordings will be stored securely in the researcher's university-associated cloud storage and will be permanently deleted upon completion of the research.

Participation is entirely voluntary, and you are free to decline to answer any question or to withdraw from the interview at any time without any consequences.

Data Storage and Access:

Research data will be securely stored on password-protected computer and used solely for scientific analysis. Only the researchers will have access to this data.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the ISE Committee for Scientific Research at Maqsut Narikbayev University.

If you have any questions, please contact Daiana Aitmurzina at d_aitmurzina@kazguu.kz or Nurzhanat Ametbek at n_ametbek@kazguu.kz. If you have any complaints regarding the study, you may contact the Chair of ISE Committee for Scientific Research at i_qoraboyev@kazguu.kz.

Thank you for reviewing this information.

Consent Form

❏   I have read and understood the information provided and:

❏   I agree to participate in this study

❏   I don't want to participate in this study

Signature:

Date:

Regional Integration in Central Asia: Analyzing Perceptions of Central Asian students studying in Kazakhstan

Kazyna Mussirkep, Zulfiya Nurlybekova and Dilnaza Temirbulatova

Appendix 1. Informed Consent Form

Regional Integration in Central Asia: Analyzing Perceptions of Central Asian students studying in Kazakhstan

Researcher/s:
Mussirkep Kazyna - bachelors students in international relations
Nurlybekova Zulfiya - bachelor's student in international relations
Temirbulatova Dilnaza - bachelor's student in international relations

Supervisor - Utebayev Artur

Thank you for your participation in our research! This study aims to explore regional integration in Central Asia by analyzing speeches from leader's meetings and studying how international students from Central Asian countries studying in Kazakhstan view regional cooperation and identity. In this study, you will take an individual interview, and answer a set of questions about your experience as a Central Asian student studying in other countries of the region. This process will take approximately 15 to 20 minutes. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time, for any reason, by simply informing the researcher. You are also free to skip any questions you prefer not to answer.

Data Privacy:
Coded Data with Confidential Storage
Any personal information that could directly or indirectly identify you will be separated from your data and replaced with a unique participant code. This code and personal information will be securely stored in a separate location accessible only to the researcher(s). You may request deletion of your data before the study concludes on 23rd May, 2025, by contacting the researcher at zulfiyanurlybekova@kazguu.kz and providing your date and time of participation. After this date, all personal information will be permanently deleted, and your responses will no longer be identifiable.

Data Storage and Access:
Research data will be securely stored on password-protected computers and used solely for scientific analysis. Only the researchers will have access to this data.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the ISE Committee for Scientific Research at Maqsut Narikbayev University.

If you have any questions, please contact Zulfiya Nurlybekova at zulfiyanurlybekova@kazguu.kz
If you have any complaints regarding the study, you may contact the Chair of ISE Committee for Scientific Research Ikboljon Qoraboyev at i_qoraboyev@kazguu.kz

Thank you for reviewing this information.

Consent Form

I have read and understood the information provided and:

❑ I agree to participate in this study

❑ I don't want to participate in this study

Appendix 3. Interview questions, questionnaires, stimuli materials in the study

Cluster 1: Background and University Enrollment

Q1. Can you tell me a little about yourself? (e.g., country of origin, university, field of study)

Q2. Why did you choose to study in Kazakhstan instead of your home country or another region?

Cluster 2: Social and Cultural Integration

Q3. Have you had any challenges studying in Kazakhstan as a foreign student? (e.g., visa, adaptation, language, finances)

Q4. Do you interact with students from other Central Asian countries? Why or why not?

Cluster 3: Barriers to and Opportunities for Regional Integration

Q5. What are the biggest obstacles to student exchange and regional cooperation in Central Asia?

Q6. If you could suggest one change to improve student mobility and academic cooperation in Central Asia, what would it be?

Q7. Do you think Central Asian countries are becoming more connected, or do they remain separate? Why?

Cluster 4: Perceptions of Kazakhstan and Identity Shifts

Q8. Do you feel a sense of common identity with students from other Central Asian countries? Why or why not?

Q9. Have your perceptions of Central Asian integration changed after your experience of living and studying in Kazakhstan?

Q10.What do you think about regional cooperation in Central Asia?

Q11. Do you see yourself working or living in another Central Asian country in the future? Why or why not?

Appendix 4. Additional materials
Interview answers

Question 1: Can you tell me a little about yourself? (e.g., country of origin, university, field of study

Participant 1: participant is from Turkmenistan studies at M. Narikbayev University, majoring in International Relations.

Participant 2: Originally from Turkmenistan. participant currently studying in second year of pharmacy at MUA.

Participant 3:1st year, MUA, 23 years old, studying pediatrics.

Participant 4: participant study at MUA in the second year.

Participant 5: Originally from Kyrgyzstan

Participant 6: participant is a first-year student studying accounting. participantis very interested in studying English. Participant have been living in Kazakhstan for almost a year.

Participant 7: Student studying linguistics, originally from Kyrgyzstan

Participant 8:Originally from Kyrgyzstan

Participant 9: participant is ethnically Kazakh and originally from Kyrgyzstan. Participant currently studying Law in Kazakhstan at KIMEP and finishing my Master's Degree.

Participant 10: participant studies at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Higher School of Economics, majoring in Business, Finance, and Insurance.

Participant 11: Originally from Kyrgyzstan

Participant 12: participant 22 years old. I was born and raised in Cherchik, a city in the Tashkent region of Uzbekistan. At 18, the participant moved to Kazakhstan to study. They are currently in their fourth year of financial studies at Maksut Narikbayev University (formerly known as KazGUU) in Astana.

Participant 13: Originally from Kashkadarya, Uzbekistan, and later moved to Tashkent. participant completed her Bachelor's degree in Civil Law at the Tashkent State University of Law (TSUL). After graduation, the participant worked as a lawyer for three years.

Participant 14: participant currently studying law at the Faculty of Law, Maksut Narikbayev University, formerly in Kazakhstan.

Participant 15: participant21 years old, and I'm originally from Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Right now, participant studying International Relations at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in Almaty. participant is a third year student. They chose this field because they have always been interested in diplomacy and how countries interact.

Participant 16: 4th year student, majoring in management (concentration in marketing). At MNU

Participant 17: 3rd year student. Exchange student. Economics major. At MNU

Participant 18: 2nd year, marketing. At MNU

Participant 19:Kimep University 4th year Business School. Management

Participant 20:From Tajikistan – 21 years old –Majoring in Finance

Question 2:Why did you choose to study in Kazakhstan instead of your home country or another region?

Participant 1: participant chose this university due to participant 's father's job, which made the admission process easier. The decision was personal—participant was drawn to the university both emotionally and academically, particularly because of its focus on international relations and law. participant also appreciated the university's modern building and attractive program offerings.

Participant 2: participant knew that education in Kazakhstan is good—many people praised it—so they decided to apply here.

Participant 3: It's a nearby country, friends recommended it, and it's affordable financially.

Participant 4: participant 's decision was influenced by friends and acquaintances, since many of them study in Kazakhstan and praise the education here.

Participant 5: Because participants have lived here since childhood.

Participant 6: Kazakhstan is one of the most developed countries in Central Asia. Secondly, participant is ethnically Kazakh, so they wanted to return to their historical homeland.

Participant 7: participants originally planned to move to Kazakhstan right after graduating from university, but they are still considering it. participant was thinking of spending a few months in Kyrgyzstan after graduation to see if they can find a job there. If not, then they plan to move back to Kazakhstan and live there again.

Participant 8: Because participants lived here for some time.

Participant 9: participant 's main motivation was to move and settle in Kazakhstan.

Participant 10: participantis ethnically Kazakh. participant 'parents have close ties with Kazakhstan and instilled love for the country since childhood. The university is one of the best, and participant personally wanted to study there. It was mostly the participant 's own decision.

Participant 11: A lot of people come here to study.

Participant 12: participants considered studying in Russia or even Europe, having passed IELTS. But they chose Kazakhstan because it's a participant 's historical homeland. participants

applied to several universities including KIMEP, KBTU, and KazNU, and was accepted to Maksut Narikbayev University. participant didn't want to study in Almaty due to traffic and familiarity — they wanted their own path, so chose Astana. participant was awarded scholarships through competitions among students from post-Soviet countries — they won for KIMEP and KBTU. For Narikbayev University, participants passed the national exam (ENT) with high scores and earned a scholarship.

Participant 13: participants came to Kazakhstan to pursue a master's degree through a special program initiated by the Ministry of Justice of Kazakhstan in cooperation with the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). This was not a purely personal decision—it was influenced by the opportunity provided through this government-supported program.

Participant 14: After finishing school, the participant 's family moved to Kazakhstan while they continued studying law for two years at Tashkent State University of Law. Eventually, participant decided to reunite with their family in Kazakhstan. Also, they chose this path because they are ethnically Kazakh. For a Kazakh, being in their own homeland is a matter of great pride. That played a big role in the participant 's decision.

Participant 15: participants had options to stay in Uzbekistan, but wanted to challenge themselves and experience something new. Kazakhstan felt familiar yet different—it's close culturally, but the education system here is more internationally oriented. Also, some of the participant 's relatives live in Kazakhstan, so it made the move easier. It was mostly a personal decision, but the participant 's older cousin, who also studied here, recommended it.

Participant 16: It was important for participants to get a high-quality education. Studying abroad has always been their dream. After passing all the exams, participanteventually chose to study in Kazakhstan. It was because of the grant. And the university itself made an impression. It was more of a personal decision and the grant's. The grant for all students is internal. Peers had no influence.

Participant 17: Thanks to the academic education system. participant like education in Kazakhstan. They think that this way they will better understand the economy of Central Asia. To ensure a sustainable economy. It was the participant 's personal decision. They also listened to other people's reviews and liked them.

Participant 18: A friend influenced the participant . The friend showed how cool it is to study at MNU and participants wanted to study at this university.

Participant 19: participants liked the university. The best university in the country. There are many mobility programs and there is diploma accreditation. Initially, participants wanted to go abroad, and KIMEP provided a full grant for international students. The full grant was a good motivation.

Participant 20: participants had other options, but the university gave a presentation and participant thought, "Why not?" After they arrived and a year passed, participants liked the education system and the professors, so they decided to continue studies here. Before that, participant was only considering Europe and had no plans to study in Kazakhstan. Admission happened mostly because of the university presentation.

Question 3: Have you had any challenges studying in Kazakhstan as a foreign student? (e.g., visa, adaptation, language, finances)

Participant 1: participant didn't face any major challenges with adaptation, finances, or documents. participant 's parents supported the participant , making everything smooth.

Participant 2: participant doesn't remember any major difficulties, only some language challenges at first, but since they know Uzbek, they get used to it quickly.

Participant 3: Some minor difficulties with language adaptation.

Participant 4: participants had difficulties with language adaptation and some financial issues. The biggest challenge, in the participant 's opinion, was obtaining a visa while still in Turkmenistan.

Participant 5: Not directly mentioned, but there are indirect references to difficulties related to registration and documentation.

Participant 6: participants had some initial difficulties with paperwork—they didn't understand the process or where to go. They had to travel between countries to get documents. But in everything else—language, study, communication—it was comfortable.

Participant 7: No, participant has not.

Participant 8: No, participant has not.

Participant 9: Yes, there were bureaucratic challenges. participants had to constantly notify government agencies, and it was difficult to obtain an individual identification number (IIN), which is essential for legalization. participantalso faced discrimination due to their level of Kazakh language proficiency. Despite that, they had no problems with adaptation overall.

Participant 10: No, participant lives with participant 's grandmother, so there are no issues with the Kazakh language. They had no problems with adaptation or academic subjects. Has lived in Kazakhstan for less than a year.

Participant 11: When the stay period ends, they give only one month. participant thinks it would be better to give students 90 days. Otherwise, they have to go elsewhere and renew it. If documents could be submitted in advance from abroad, it would be better. As it is now, participant can end up being deported for 2–3 months. At first, they realized that one month wasn't enough. → Problems with documentation and registration. → When the participant arrived in Kazakhstan, dealing with documents and registration was difficult. Corruption was also a problem. → Who helped with adaptation and paperwork? → The university helped. The student affairs department explained everything, even before the trip. They explained everything thoroughly so that participant wouldn't make mistakes.

Participant 12: Yes. Initially, participants struggled with mathematics because the participant 's school taught in Russian, but university courses were in English. That was hard in the beginning, but the participant worked through it. Socially, participant was nervous at first about

making friends, but knowing both Kazakh and Russian helped. They made friends in the dorm quickly.

Participant 13: participant noted that the transition was relatively smooth since Uzbek and Kazakh cultures are similar. The language was not a major barrier, as many people speak Russian, and participants were already fluent in it. Financially, participant 's scholarship covered everything, so they didn't face significant hardship.

Participant 14: Yes, definitely. Participant knows the Kazakh language because they learned it from the participant 's mother and family, but never studied Kazakh grammar formally. So, communicating can be difficult sometimes—especially when the participant struggles with spelling or phrasing. Although ethnically Kazakh, participants faced a year of discomfort trying to assimilate. People would ask awkward questions like "Do you know Uzbek?" or "Can you cook pilaf?" It felt discriminatory at times. Now, however, participant feel more comfortable and proud of their identity.

Participant 15: There were some challenges, especially at the beginning. Navigating the visa process was confusing—participants had to reapply and go to different offices just to get simple documents signed. Also, even though the participant speaks Russian, understanding academic terms and some local slang took time. Financially, participantis on a partial scholarship, so they have to budget carefully, but it's manageable.

Participant 16: There were no serious difficulties. participant was ready in advance to study abroad. And 4 more people from the participant 's country came with them, which made the adaptation easier. The language barrier didn't bother the participant either. But it was difficult with the training load. The university administration contacted participants and told them where to go and what to do. It wasn't that hard, for 2 weeks.

Participant 17: Yes. It was difficult for participants at the beginning because of the educational material and the teaching methodology. Also, the city of Astana is very large and difficult to navigate. But people helped.

Participant 18: No one explained to the participants how to register as a foreign student, how to get a Kaspi and an IIN, or what it is. But then they helped.

Participant 19: As such, there were no problems. The university itself provided all the conditions for good integration. It helped with the paperwork. There are no problems with the language. But the older generation is not always sympathetic; they can speak Kazakh, but the participants does not understand it. From a financial point of view, everything is normal, even if it is more expensive than in Tajikistan.

Participant 20: No. The university helped a lot. They supported the participants with legal matters. Nothing was required from the participant . There were no financial problems. Adaptation was a bit hard due to the climate. participantis from a warm country, but despite that, they decided to stay. In other aspects, adaptation was easy because friends and acquaintances helped with everything. Over time, participant got used to it.

Question 4: Do you interact with students from other Central Asian countries? Why or why not?

Participant 1: participants primarily interacts with Kazakh students. participant hasn't had much interaction with students from other Central Asian countries but expressed a desire to meet and make friends with them.

Participant 2: Yes, participant does interact with students from other Central Asian countries.

Participant 3: Yes, participant communicates with Kazakhs and Uzbeks because they share a common culture and similar languages.

Participant 4: Yes, participant does. Most of the students in the participant 's course are Kazakhs, and there are a few Turkmen students as well.

Participant 5: Not directly stated, but other students from Central Asia are mentioned in conversation, along with a recommendation to reach out to the international office.

Participant 6: There are many students here from China and India, but fewer from Kyrgyzstan. Visually, they all look alike, even the participant 's culture and holidays are similar. Sometimes people don't even realize the participant is not from Kazakhstan until they say so.

Participant 7: Yes, participant does.

Participant 8: participants had acquaintances from Uzbekistan. The participants have Uzbek relatives, so they communicate with them, and they have sometimes lived in Uzbekistan.

Participant 9: Yes, especially through sports, participant felt a sense of unity with other Central Asian students. However, outside of sports and apart from shared history, there isn't much connecting them. Students from countries like Tajikistan feel more distant. Generally, there is little effort made towards integration.

Participant 10: participant interacts with people from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. They all like it here.

Participant 11: Yes, participant dies.

Participant 12: Not much. There's a double-degree program with Tashkent University of Law, but participants didn't connect with students from there. participant prefers spending time with Kazakh students. They don't usually mention that they are from Uzbekistan — it's not something they focus on.

Participant 13: Yes, participant communicates with peers from Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan. participant 's program is international, so students naturally form connections across countries. participant emphasized that these interactions have been very positive and enriching.

Participant 14: Yes, participant dies. participants studied in Tashkent for two years, lived in a dorm, and met many students—Uzbeks, Karakalpaks, Kazakhs. They still keep in touch regularly. They discuss various topics and enjoy each other's company. participantalso communicates well with students from all three groups at participant 's current university, even though they weren't placed in the English-language track.

Participant 15: Yes, definitely. participants have met people from Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and of course, Kazakhstan. Most of them live in the same dorm or attend the same lectures. They usually get along well—they share a lot culturally. They celebrate Nowruz together, for example. Those similarities help build connections naturally.

Participant16 : participant communicates actively. participant got acquainted with Uzbekistan. It's interesting to learn about their cultures. They were friends, they covered objects together.

Participant 17: Yes. participant communicates with Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Clashes between families began to occur, which led to cultural differences. Seminars and general events helped to make friends.

Participant 18: Yes, they live in a dorm. Friendship is due to the similarity of cultures. Especially between Uzbeks and Tajiks.

Participant 19: Sure. KIMEP has a very large community of international students from Central Asia. They invite each other to different programs, to visit, to help with employment. Great networking.

Participant 20: Yes. participant interacts with students from Uzbekistan, has acquaintances from Tajikistan, and with Kazakhs. participant has been friends with Kazakhs since their first year. Because they share very similar views on many things — even though they're from different countries, they have similar mentalities.

Question 5: What are the biggest obstacles to student exchange and regional cooperation in Central Asia?

Participant 1: One key challenge is the visa requirement. Turkmenistan mandates a visa, which complicates things. Another issue is that the MNU diploma is not recognized in Turkmenistan, which limits employment opportunities back home.

Participant 2: In participant 's opinion, there are no real obstacles. If a person wants something, they will make it happen. But participants would say there are some difficulties with visas since they need to renew them on time and go through the process to obtain one.

Participant 3: participant didn't face any obstacles.

Participant 4: In participant 's view, if we talk about students from Turkmenistan, the main obstacles are internal visa issues and a slight language barrier.

Participant 5: Previously, migration was more difficult because the permitted stay was limited to 30 days. Now, it's 90 days, and it has become easier to integrate and move between Central Asian countries.

Participant 6: In participant 's opinion, bureaucracy is the biggest issue—especially with documents if you're a foreigner. Also, the difficulty of obtaining citizenship directly affects employment.

Participant 7: participant doesn't know.

Participant 8: participant doesn't know, hasn't experienced any.

Participant 9: There are too many requirements and documents needed. Residence permits (RVP) are only issued for one year, which is inconvenient for students. The process of staying legally in Kazakhstan is complicated. On a broader level, regional tensions—like disputes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—and political blackmail hinder cooperation. Forums and initiatives often lack real effectiveness.

Participant 10: Adaptation comes through living in the dormitory. It may be hard emotionally because there's no family nearby, which can be distressing. When participants applied, around 15 people went through the process, but the quota was given to only 5. The rest didn't make it because they hadn't carefully checked the website, even though everything was written there in detail.

Participant 11: At first, participants realized that one month wasn't enough. It would be better if documents could be submitted in advance from abroad. Otherwise, participant might face deportation for 2–3 months.

Participant 12: Bureaucracy is the biggest obstacle. The process of applying, the number of required documents — it's overwhelming and discouraging for many students.

Participant 13: participant pointed out bureaucratic and institutional limitations, especially related to the recognition of academic degrees and a lack of region-wide educational frameworks.

Participant 14: The first issue is bureaucracy. Another is the difference in educational systems. In Tashkent, they had midterms and finals every semester—simple and predictable. But in Kazakhstan, the system includes deadlines, projects, and multiple layers of assessments. It's more stressful. Still, with time, students can adapt. participant wouldn't say it's a major barrier, just something to consider.

Participant 15: participant would say bureaucracy is still the biggest problem. Every country has its own rules, and nothing is really standardized. Simple things like recognizing academic credits or processing residency documents take a long time. Also, there's not enough information available about regional exchange programs—students don't always know what opportunities exist.

Participant 16: Lack of information. And transparency of student exchange between countries. And the language barrier can be a problem. Diploma recognition. And the financial side is no less important, because accommodation and transportation are also factors that remain barriers to academic mobility. How honest is everything when it comes to the exchange and distribution of who exactly will be going through the exchange program.

Participant 17: Lack of information about academic exchange in Central Asia. It is difficult to register and apply due to limited information. It was also difficult to register a Caspi credit card, because without Caspi it is difficult to buy something.

Participant 18: There are no problems as such. Especially in terms of student exchange. participants did not give an exact answer.

Participant 19: participant doesn't know. Because they mostly go to Europe or Asia rather than Central Asia. The international office helps quite well.

Participant 20: Adaptation, probably — but it depends more on the person, how well they can adapt to life abroad. Also, language barriers. For participants personally, the climate is a key factor. That's the most important thing for the participant . Or, for example, if someone can't find friends or acquaintances. Academic challenges too — there might be a different curriculum or way of delivering information.

Question 6: If you could suggest one change to improve student mobility and academic cooperation in Central Asia, what would it be?

Participant 1: participant would remove the diploma recognition restriction and would work to develop more academic exchange programs, especially between Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. participant believes this could help show that Turkmenistan is more open and allow others to better understand its culture.

Participant 2: It would be good if universities offered more distance learning courses.

Participant 3: Support with studies, the academic program, and language teachers. As for government-level support, participant is not sure.

Participant 4: participant thinks that creating academic banks to provide scholarships for students in the region would be the most effective solution.

Participant 5: If participants were in a leadership position, the first thing they would address is providing housing or, at the very least, offering assistance with residency registration. International staff and students face serious documentation problems. Registration is essential—without it, it's hard to legalize one's stay.

Participant 6: Simplify the process of obtaining citizenship. Even with a residence permit, participant is not always allowed to work fully. It's especially harder for non-Kazakhs to get citizenship than it is for ethnic Kazakhs. participant would change the law to make integration easier for students and young professionals from Central Asia. For example, they would create a separate citizenship track for students and open student banks and exchange programs.

Participant 7: Maybe increase the number of exchange students.

Participant 8: participant doesn't know what to suggest.

Participant 9: participant would simplify the requirements and documentation process for foreign students as well as simplify entry and residence procedures in Kazakhstan and create a database to track incoming foreign students for better management.

Participant 10: More quotas should be allocated. Only 10 people from Central Asia received the quota. Everyone needs a grant, so it would be good if more were available. participant would introduce additional courses for those who don't know the Kazakh language — at least 2–3 hours per week.

Participant 11: Extend the period of stay and reduce bureaucratic hurdles related to registration.

Participant 12: Simplify the documentation process. Make fewer documents required and reduce bureaucratic hurdles. participant would remove the restrictions that discourage foreign

students. They know people who left Kazakhstan because of these issues. If someone is really motivated to study here, they should be supported.

Participant 13: participant suggested establishing a unified Central Asian education system or at least a mutual recognition framework for degrees and academic credits. If in a leadership position, participant would start by facilitating bilateral agreements between ministries of education and creating regional scholarship programs similar to Erasmus+.

Participant 14: Governments should launch more exchange programs and scholarships. Education ministries play a key role in this, and more intergovernmental agreements are needed to make mobility easier. If participants worked in the Ministry of Education, they would start with bilateral agreements, one country at a time. Once there's success with one, others can follow.

Participant 15: participant would suggest creating a centralized digital platform where students from Central Asia can apply for exchanges, scholarships, or short programs across the region— like a regional version of Erasmus+. It would also be good to offer more short-term programs or joint degrees.

Participant 16: Create some kind of common regional platform where all the universities of Central Asia are united. Where all the available grants, additional information, etc., would be. Such a platform will simplify the application process. The first step in a senior position would be to initiate interstate agreements on the recognition of academic credits and diplomas within Central Asia, because there are cases that diplomas are not recognized. So that there are no legal obstacles.

Participant 17: Create an academic network. participants helped newly arrived students financially. A special phone number and educational institution for exchange students, where they can share their learning experiences. Share experience. Also organize regional student fairs for student coordinators.

Participant 18: participant would suggest opening up more places for students in educational institutions—by type of grant, etc.

Participant 19: participant would add countries from Turkmenistan, for example, so that they could come to Kazakhstan and learn about the culture. Provide grants between universities. Help more Turkmen citizens so that they can cooperate more (if desired). So that they can see a different education system.

Participant 20: participant would suggest organizing events dedicated to uniting Central Asian students. There are already such events every year, but participants think more publicity should be given to them. Because students usually leave their countries, there should be more focus on studying within Central Asia — because education here isn't worse. Students should be sent on exchange — for example, every semester to a different Central Asian country. So they can study each other's cultures. Even if they know some facts about the countries, that's not enough.

Question 7: Do you think Central Asian countries are becoming more connected, or do they remain separate? Why?

Participant 1: participant believes each country still tries to remain independent. In participant 's home countries, people strongly preserve their culture and traditions, including traditional

clothing. participant feel people believe separation is good. However, participant admits they can't say for sure, as they have lived in Kazakhstan for the past five years. They note that people trust their government for providing peace and shelter.

Participant 2: participant believes the region is connected by culture and history—these factors help unite the peoples of the region.

Participant 3: Yes, the countries are becoming closer because they are brotherly nations. People in the participant 's country think the same.

Participant 4: The region is still connected by culture and history. participant believes these factors help to unite the peoples within the region.

Participant 5: participant thinks development is happening, but slowly. Everything occurs at the official level—yes, they sign things, launch initiatives—but there's no major breakthrough yet. Maybe in the future. One example is humanitarian aid from Kyrgyzstan to its neighbors. It shows that cooperation exists and is strong, even if it progresses slowly.

Participant 6: At first glance, it seems like the region is divided, but in reality, the countries are very similar in appearance, culture, and language. You only realize someone is from a different country when they tell you. Otherwise, mentally and visually, they're like one whole. People are often surprised when they find out the participant is from Kyrgyzstan—especially because of how similar they are. But overall, the attitude is neutral.

Participant 7: participant is now in their third year, and the number of exchange students has increased significantly. Students from different countries are coming. participant think things are getting better every year. This is progressing, and it has become easier for students to go abroad on exchange programs, especially to Central Asian countries.

Participant 8: participant doesn't know if any integration or projects are happening. They have no thoughts on the topic. They are not very interested in it.

Participant 9: The countries remain separate. For example, disputes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan demonstrate how divided the region is. Integration efforts often result in nothing, and forums are mostly ineffective.

Participant 10: Of course, people want to unite. participants themselves want to study and stay here. That's why people support Central Asian integration. People in the participant 's country also support it. Very few people are against it.

Participant 11: participant doesn't know.

Participant 12: Yes, the countries are becoming more connected. For example, during Nowruz, participant saw students from different Central Asian countries celebrating together and sharing their traditional dishes. participant believes that the region's Turkic roots and cultural overlaps help build connection.

Participant 13: participant believes there is growing connection, especially among the youth, due to education, technology, and cultural similarities. However, participant also noted that government-level cooperation still lags behind grassroots enthusiasm.

Participant 14: participant thinks the countries should be more cooperative—especially considering the geopolitical situation in the region. Countries like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan need to work together. For example, water disputes involving the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers are growing concerns. These issues will only worsen in the future as demand increases. The region must address them now to avoid future conflict.

Participant 15: The countries are slowly becoming more connected—especially through education and trade. participant thinks young people are leading the way in terms of connection, especially with social media and regional events. But on the political level, countries still prefer to act independently. There's not much trust yet between governments.

Participant 16: participant believes that Central Asia is gradually becoming more coherent. Young people play a key role here. Because thanks to education, digital technologies, and exchange programs, new connections are being formed among society. But there are still some historical and political differences that persist.

Participant 17: The region is slowly moving towards unification. Because it is quite limited in resources. participant think it would be very good for the government to have regional integration, because they can work together.

Participant 18: It depends on the cities of each country. For example, in the capital of Tajikistan, people believe that Central Asia is becoming more connected, but in remote cities they do not think so and think that it is not so necessary. Also, in the capital, people want to continue to unite in Central Asia.

Participant 19: There used to be collectivity, but now people and countries are focused on individualism. Everyone wants to preserve their culture and stand out. For example, there was an academic mobility program between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, but now it's gone. They want to promote their own universities. In the participant 's country, they don't say anything—everything is normal.

Participant 20: participant thinks the region is becoming more united. Because many tourists from Central Asia visit other Central Asian countries. And since there is a similar mentality, the countries should focus on that more so that they unite further and work on big joint projects. Including education — that way, there will be more progress and things will get better. More top universities will appear. Plus, the distance isn't that far — you can be at home and at school. Exchange programs are one of the aspects of Central Asian integration. For example, when you talk about your culture — that's how people grow closer. People in the participant 's country are very positive about this and are also in favor of uniting the countries. There are many programs and forums that come to the countries and focus on Central Asian cooperation — to make it better.

Question 8:Do you feel a sense of common identity with students from other Central Asian countries? Why or why not?

Participant 1: Yes, participant feels there is a shared mentality. People understand each other easily, and even the languages are similar. When people speak Kazakh with the participant , they understand. participant 's sense of cultural similarity hasn't changed much during their stay in Kazakhstan since they had already lived in Azerbaijan before, which helped them adapt quickly.

Participant 2: Yes, participant do feel a sense of common identity, as mentioned earlier—thanks to shared history, similar cultures, and languages.

Participant 3: Yes, participant feels a sense of shared identity because they have similar traditions, and all in the region are Muslims.

Participant 4: Yes, participant does feel a shared identity. As mentioned earlier, thanks to shared history and the similarity of cultures and languages, participant feel a sense of common identity.

Participant 5: Partially mentioned, through comparisons of mentalities and personal experience.

Participant 6: Yes, because people look alike, share the same traditions, a common history, and Islamic culture. Unless someone tells you, you won't even know where they are from. – Yes, before arriving, participant thought Kyrgyz people were very different. Now they see they are almost the same.

Participant 7: participant has never thought about it before, and even after the question, they can't say they feel a sense of identity with the Tajik people.

Participant 8: Probably after moving to Kazakhstan. Before that, participant didn't really think about it.

Participant 9: In some ways, yes — especially through sports and among Turkic peoples ("We are Turks"). However, in daily life, that sense of unity is not really present. Tajikistan, for instance, feels more distant. Apart from a shared history, there's little that connects the region.

Participant 10: Yes, people are all similar. They have common goals and desires. participant says that people everywhere are the same — maybe the slang is different, but the meaning is the same. People are all the same and have a lot in common.

Participant 11: Yes, participant feels a sense of common identity.

Participant 12: Yes, participant does. They don't divide people by region or nationality. People are all Kazakhs or Turkic people, sharing similar traditions and holidays — like Nowruz, even though each country celebrates it in their own way (e.g., sumalak in Uzbekistan vs. nauryz kozhe in Kazakhstan). Yes, the participant 's identity has strengthened here. Though born in Uzbekistan, they feel strongly connected to Kazakhstan and the broader Turkic community.

Participant 13: Yes, very much so. participant feel they share similar traditions, values, and languages. This feeling has grown stronger during participant 's time in Kazakhstan. They now see themselves as part of a broader Central Asian community.

Participant 14: participant does feel a sense of common identity due to similarity in cultures.

Participant 15: Yes, participant does. People share a lot—language similarities, cultural values, even food. For example, talking to someone from Kyrgyzstan or Turkmenistan often feels like talking to someone from home. There might be small differences, but overall they understand each other well. That creates a feeling of unity.

Participant 16: Rather, yes. Because they share cultural values and traditions. participant knows many people from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. In many ways, their values are similar. This feeling appears during joint studies and in everyday communication. Because the participants

realized more that there are many similarities between people. It has only changed for the better since moving here.

Participant 17: Yes, they share a similar language, think the same about the world. Even jokes are similar. Before coming here, participant didn't think that the region is connected, but after moving here it is clear for them that they share a similar identity. Also, history is similar.

Participant 18: After moving here, participants realized how similar people are. Not only culture and language, but also mentality.

Participant 19: Yes. Cultural values are the same. So the participant thinks everyone is similar. Kazakhs and Kyrgyz are similar, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are similar. When participants moved to Kazakhstan, they did not feel that it was a completely different country from Tajikistan. Even the upbringing is the same. Before moving in, participant hadn't thought about it at all. And now they feel it more.

Participant 20: No. Because even though there are similar views on life, each country has its own identity. And its own uniqueness, and the participant believes it is important to keep the balance. Every country has its own identity.

Question 9: Have your perceptions of Central Asian integration changed after your experience of living and studying in Kazakhstan?

Participant 1: participant didn't notice significant changes but recalled cultural events hosted by the Turkmen Embassy where they felt a strong sense of cooperation and friendship between cultures.

Participant 2: participant 's view of regional integration has remained positive. They just hadn't really thought about it before coming here.

Participant 3: participant has always thought this way.

Participant 4: participant 's perception has remained positive—they still believe in regional integration. They just hadn't really thought about it before coming here.

Participant 5: Yes, participant sees growth and expansion of opportunities. Simplified migration rules make integration more realistic than before.

Participant 6: Yes. participant used to feel more of a difference, but now they feel almost complete cultural unity. Kazakhstan has become a comfortable home for them.

Participant 7: Yes, participant sees a positive trend. More exchange students, more opportunities, and overall, there's a sense of progress.

Participant 8: participant doesn't think so.

Participant 9: The ongoing bureaucratic difficulties and feelings of exclusion shifted the participant 's view.

Participant 10: This feeling strengthened once the participant started living in Kazakhstan. They had some sense of it before, but couldn't fully experience it. Now they fully understand it. People are similar and interact with one another.

Participant 11: participant doesn't think so.

Participant 12: Definitely. participant thought it would be difficult, but the experience exceeded expectations. They participated in programs like Work and Travel — opportunities they wouldn't have had if they stayed in Uzbekistan. A turning point was realizing they were not the only Kazakh from Uzbekistan studying here. That sense of community helped shift the participant 's perception.

Participant 13: Yes. Before coming to Kazakhstan, participant didn't think much about regional integration. But through interactions with peers and professors, they realized the importance of cooperation. A key moment was when students from different countries collaborated on a moot court competition. This made participants reflect on how well they can work together despite national differences.

Participant 14: participant doesn't think that their perception changed.

Participant 15: Absolutely. Before coming here, participant didn't think much about regional cooperation. They saw each country as very separate. But living and studying here, meeting people from across the region—it's made participants realize how connected they actually are. Now they see the potential for real integration if the focus is on the youth.

Participant 16: This feeling was reinforced by a moment during university events where students from Central Asian countries presented their cultures with national clothes, dishes, and dances. participants were surprised that while there are differences in some traditions, there is a similar respect for family and elders. A warm interaction helped them realize that there are more points of contact.

Participant 17: Yes, a lot. It happened in terms of national interactions. participants have gone to museums, amusement parks, and monuments where they found that there is a similar history, political background, and identity.

Participant 18: Yes. When participants lived in their own country, they did not notice a common identity with students from Central Asia, but after moving here they realized how similar they are. Not only culture and language, but also mentality.

Participant 19: participant doesn't know for sure. It exists between the countries. participant thinks it's a good thing. There are no examples.

Participant 20: participant has always thought that way. But they don't think it's a bad thing. Identity from their country is a feature — and everyone has their own. Everyone will have their own associations with each country. And that's one of the aspects of identity — and how people distinguish others. Each country has its own charm, and at the same time, they come together. They might have disagreements, but despite that, they are more united, and the countries themselves aren't that big — the traditions are similar, and that brings them closer.

Question 10:What do you think about regional cooperation in Central Asia?

Participant 1: participant views it positively, saying it's a good way for countries to learn from one another. participant couldn't recall specific cooperation events but emphasized the value of mutual experience.

Participant 2: participant can't recall a specific moment, but they see integration happening when they watch the news.

Participant 3: Relations are improving. participants are not treated differently—even though they are Turkmen, they are accepted as locals and people help them.

Participant 4: participant can't recall a specific moment, but they see that integration is happening because the countries' leaders are engaging with each other.

Participant 5: It is developing, but slowly and with limited impact so far. Nonetheless, real examples of support—like humanitarian aid—prove that cooperation is present.

Participant 6: It's necessary. The region has common interests, and if paperwork is simplified and exchange opportunities are provided, countries can become more united. – When participants started talking to students from Uzbekistan—they turned out to be very smart and open. participant began thinking about studying in Tashkent and realized how close the countries actually are.

Participant 7: participant thinks every year it gets better, and students are finding it easier to participate in exchange programs, especially if it's a Central Asian country.

Participant 8: participant doesn't follow any news, because they are not interested in it. They don't know if anything is happening. They haven't looked into the topic.

Participant 9: Yes, participant 's views have changed. Before, they didn't think much about it, but now they see that the region has more in common than they expected. Studying here made participants more open to the idea of regional cooperation.

Participant 10: participant 's worldview has shifted more towards the Kazakh side. Regarding regional cooperation — it is all happening within the diaspora. It has a very positive impact. Regional cooperation does exist. participant 's family interactions influenced this change — they started using more Kazakh words in the family and among classmates.

Participant 11: To be honest, participant doesn't know.

Participant 12: In participant 's opinion, cooperation is going okay.

Participant 13: Unfortunately, participant can't properly answer this question.

Participant 14: Yes, participantdoes. They're similar in culture and face the same problems—national identity, bureaucracy, corruption. Integration would help solve many of these issues. But the participantis also realistic: true integration requires political will and strong leadership. Corruption is a major barrier that needs to be addressed first.

Participant 15: participant thinks it's necessary, especially in terms of water, trade, and education. If countries in Central Asia worked together more, they could have a stronger voice globally. Right now, cooperation is still surface-level and mostly led by political events, but the people-to-people level is more promising.

Participant 16: participant still wants new initiatives and exchange programs. This can facilitate integration. Thanks to academic mobility, participants have this opinion. Living abroad helps them delve deeper into this topic—about how Central Asia is united.

Participant 17: participant thinks that it is very good.

Participant 18: Yes. When participants lived in their own country, they did not notice a common identity with students from Central Asia, but after moving here they realized how similar they are. Not only culture and language, but also mentality.

Participant 19: participant does not know how to answer. They just think it is real in Central Asia.

Participant 20: Regional cooperation exists. The same student exchange programs. Not just studying, but also various other programs. participant 's opinion changed specifically because of studying in Kazakhstan. They used to think education in Central Asia wasn't great, but it turns out there are many good universities. Things are only getting better here.

Question 11: Do you see yourself working or living in another Central Asian country in the future? Why or why not?

Participant 1: participant would like to work in both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, ideally in an embassy setting.

Participant 2: Since the region has more or less similar languages and cultures, participant would actually prefer to gain new experiences in Europe—to work and live there.

Participant 3: participant will return to their home country and start working there. They want to live there with their parents. Also, because of the difficulties with documents. If there were no issues with paperwork, participant would have stayed in Kazakhstan to work and live. They would recommend Kazakhstan for studying—they always help. Yes, if the government and employers supported participants with documents, they would stay in Kazakhstan.

Participant 4: participant is the only child of their parents, so after graduation they plan to return home to live and work. If someone asked for a participant 's recommendation, they would confidently recommend Kazakhstan, because it offers very good education in the region.

Participant 5: Yes, participant does see themselves living and working in Kazakhstan. In a way, they grew up here, and the mentality is closer to theirs. When they go to Kyrgyzstan, it's pleasant, but living and working there would be a different matter. participantis more drawn to Kazakhstan, especially Astana.

Participant 6: participant would like to finish their bachelor's in Kazakhstan, but maybe do a master's in Uzbekistan. In the future—they plan to work in Kazakhstan. They feel comfortable here and see many opportunities. – Simplifying the process of obtaining citizenship would give more rights and access to the labor market.

Participant 7: Yes. Even though the participant has been living in Kazakhstan since first grade, they still feel a strong connection to Kyrgyzstan. They'd like to contribute to the development of their country, see if they can be useful, and gain experience working among Kyrgyz people.

Participant 8: No. participant think if they consider other countries—say, Europe or the U.S.— maybe they'd feel more comfortable living there, in a freer environment with less judgment. Because they feel uncomfortable when people might judge or think things about them. They want to be in a more open environment.

Participant 9: participant might consider living in Uzbekistan for a while — they like their approach to sports. But overall, participant plans to bring their entire family to Kazakhstan and settle here. They think simplified legal processes and better integration policies would make it easier.

Participant 10: participant plans to stay in Kazakhstan, in Almaty. Their plans are only here. Life is not hard for them.

Participant 11: Will see, however right now participant is not sure.

Participant 12: No, participant doesn't see themselves living elsewhere in Central Asia. They had a chance to go to the American University in Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan but chose not to. Kazakhstan felt more familiar and attractive — places like Astana drew them in. Familiarity and strong emotional connection like the participant has with Kazakhstan. That's why they didn't choose Kyrgyzstan — it felt too unfamiliar.

Participant 13: Yes, especially in Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan. participant opportunities in legal consultancy and international cooperation. What would make this easier is visa liberalization, better recognition of legal qualifications, and more regional job platforms.

Participant 14: participant is not sure yet.

Participant 15: Yes, participant can see themselves working in Kazakhstan long-term, or even in Kyrgyzstan. They feel comfortable in the region, and there are good opportunities—especially in international organizations. It would be easier if visa policies were relaxed and work permits were easier to get. If those changes happen, participant think more young people would move around the region freely.

Participant 16: participant sees themselves living or working in Central Asia, and they are interested in working in Kazakhstan because there is a lot of business and marketing work here. They would have simplified professional barriers. participant don't mind returning to Tajikistan, but they are considering other options.

Participant 17: Yes, after this exchange experience participants would like to work in Central Asian countries and also in their own country. They would like to work in international economy centers or banks, or in research centers. participant thinks that maybe there will be some difficulties in language, language barriers. But they still can overcome this.

Participant 18: Yes. participant want to work in Central Asia because they understand that there are more opportunities here than in Europe, for example. It's easier to open a business and grow it here. So participants will definitely stay here.

Participant 19: participant wants to move to another country in a foreign country. But they want to improve education in their country. Education is like studying abroad, there are many talented people, but they don't have the resources and information to figure it out. To develop business in the field of education. It would be nice to work in Kazakhstan, but it is difficult because you need to get a residence permit. participant would like to work with people from Central Asia, because they made themselves. They are very hardworking and smart.

Participant 20: Yes. After finishing their studies, participant want to return to Tajikistan. But if there's an opportunity to work in Central Asia — they would accept. In the field of finance,

investment. But such fields aren't very developed in their country. And in Kazakhstan there are such companies, and they'd like to try. participant would gladly work with people from Central Asia, and they enjoy all of it. Their dream is to work together with Central Asian people. Especially since the participant 's experience shows that no one holds negative views about their nationality. They're confident this will help them in the future.

The EU Approach to Counter Foreign Digital Interference

Zhanel Barlybaikyzy, Assyl Duisen

Annex 1. Meta information on EEAS reports

Report	Year	Pages	Incidents	Period	Scope	Special Features
1st	2023	36	100	Oct–Dec 2022	Global, focus on Ukraine	Pilot methodology, Kill Chain approach
2nd	2024	38	750	Dec 2022–Nov 2023	Global, 49% attacks in EU	Risk-based response framework, FIMI Toolbox
3rd	2025	43	505	Nov 2023–Nov 2024	Global, 90 countries targeted	FIMI Exposure Matrix

Annex 2: Rapid Alert System

Annex 3: Impersonation techniques and victims

IMPERSONATION TECHNIQUES AND VICTIMS

A brief look into cases in which Russia impersonated legitimate, trusted entities illustrates that nobody is off limits from seeing their identity or brand misused. Threat actors use impersonation to add legitimacy to their messages and to reach and affect audiences familiar with and trusting the impersonated entities.

Six incidents used cases of impersonation. All of them related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. **Media outlets were entities most frequently impersonated.** In four incidents, fake cover pages imitating the visual style of European satirical magazines, namely French *Charlie Hebdo*, German *Titanic* and Spanish *El Jueves*, were created to attack Ukraine and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Additionally, two videos imitated international media (*Aljazeera* and *Euronews*). The videos falsely claimed that Ukrainian football fans were detained in Doha because of Nazi behaviour during the World Cup, and that a German auction house was going to destroy Russian artworks. All while pretending the message originated from reputable media.

European institutions and politicians were the second most often impersonated entities (two incidents). An animated video listing the alleged disadvantages of Ukraine's accession to NATO, created using an AI-generated voice was presented as an official video by the European Security and Defence College. Moreover, a false account on Facebook used the name and personal information of the former chairman of the Lublin City Council (Poland) to publish a post on the missile blast in Przewodów.

According to preliminary investigations, a Russian attributed channel seemed to be the original publisher of the video impersonating Euronews. The rest of the cases were published by non-attributed channels in the Russian FIMI infosphere. However, the content was rapidly picked-up and amplified by channels attributed to Russian state structures, such as state-linked or state-controlled outlets.

Figure 9 Fabricated covers of EU satirical images

(EEAS, 2023)

Annex 4: Polish elections 2023

POLISH ELECTIONS 2023

Phase 1: Months before the Polish elections, Belarusian state-affiliated media created Polish-language channels on social media targeting audiences in Poland with daily content. Such channels were used to spread Belarusian and Russian FIMI content in Polish throughout all the period leading up to the elections[76].

In this phase, the FIMI infosphere also attacked individual candidates by using old videos reframed in a new context (*Threats 1, 3*).

Phase 2: A few days before the Polish 2023 elections, a website in Polish shared a post, containing leaked photos and videos targeting a candidate in the Polish Parliamentary elections, among other political figures. These were obtained through a previous hacking operation[77]. The website was imitating a domain, which was previously blocked for releasing leaked emails from Polish politicians, and which was attributed by independent researchers and Polish services to the Russian and Belarusian security services[78]. The amplification of the content was conducted mostly on X (formerly Twitter), where only 4 accounts were responsible for more than 70% of the activity, indicating inorganic amplification of the content. The aim of this incident was to specifically target certain candidates and to discredit them publicly through anonymous entities (*Threats 3, 5*).

Phase 3: Two days before the elections, Polish media published a video of a police intervention in one of the three polling stations in Poland, where an anonymous bomb threat had been sent before the day of the vote.[79]

Accounts belonging to the Russian FIMI infosphere presented the video in a reframed context, alleging that explosions had already occurred. This misleading framing was amplified by some unattributed pro-Russia accounts on social media. This incident shows an intentional attempt to escalate fears around the alleged bomb threats to the polling stations and thereby dissuade people from going to vote (*Threats 2, 4*).
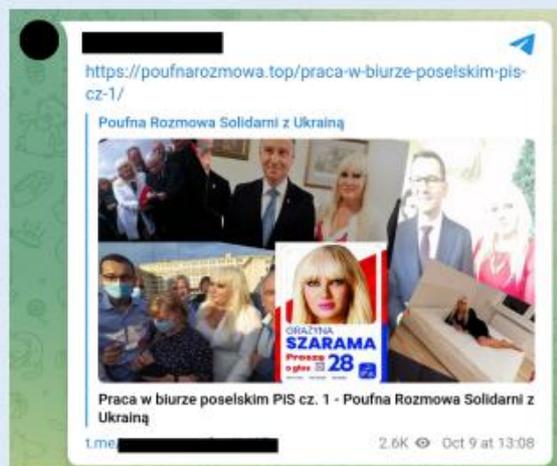
Figure 11: Amplification on Telegram of the leaked files of a candidate running in the Polish elections 2023.
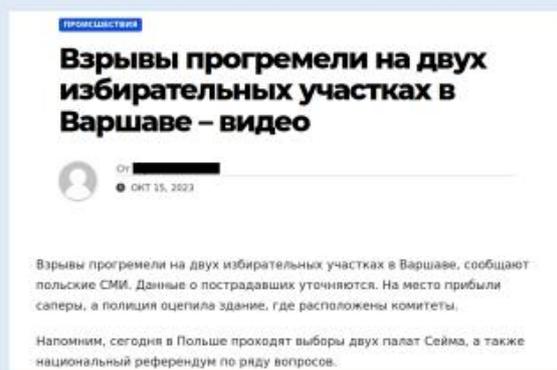
Figure 12: Screenshot from a Russian media outlet. Translation of the title: "Explosions occurred in two polling stations in Warsaw – video"
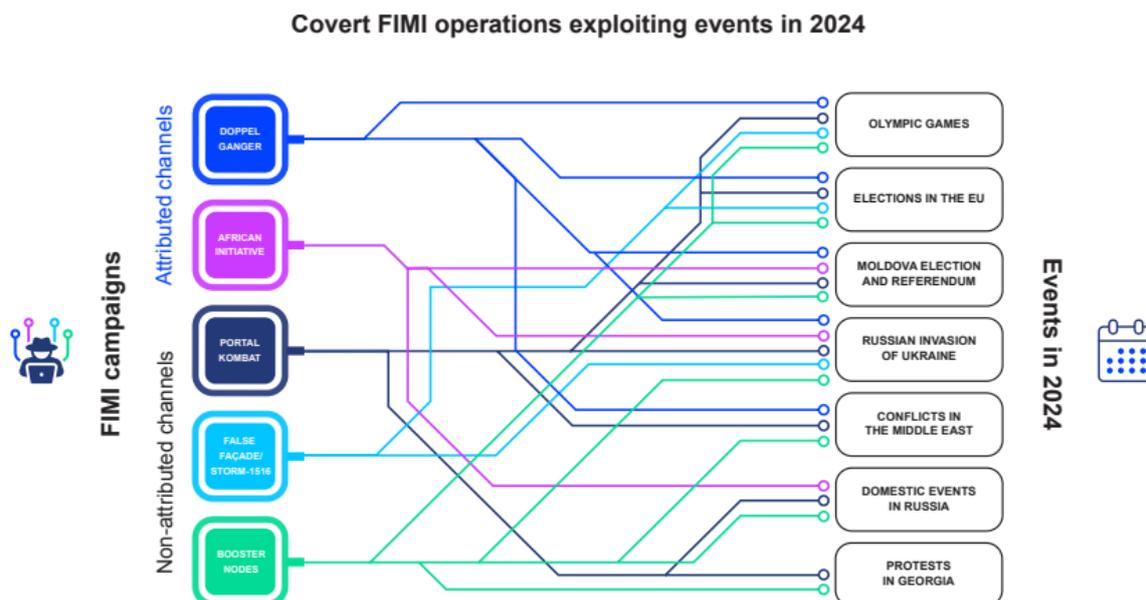
(EEAS, 2024)

Annex 5: Spanish elections 2023

SPANISH ELECTIONS 2023

Phases 1 and 2: Months before the Spanish elections took place, an official Telegram account of the Russian government suggested to its audience to follow a long list of Telegram channels as a source of information. Sometime later, channels linked to the Russian FIMI infosphere further promoted this initial list through a link allowing subscription to approximately 20 Telegram channels with a single click. These channels were later used to carry out FIMI activities in relation to the Spanish elections. (***Threat 1***)

During **Phase 2**, a pro-Russian hacktivist network claimed to leak information about one Spanish and one European website in Telegram posts containing emails and passwords of the alleged leak. Considering that some information on the alleged leaked accounts were actually included in previous database leaks, this might indicate the creation of inauthentic documents to intimidate opponents and degrade the image of Spain and Europe. Although these incidents did not impact election processes, they could be used to fuel doubts about the integrity of systems. (***Threats 4, 5***)

Phase 3: Some of the accounts mentioned in Phase 1 were involved in a swarming action on different platforms aimed at disseminating fake Spanish electoral ballots containing names of Russian politicians (***Threat 2***).

Additionally, two days before the elections, a domain was registered imitating the official website of the Community of Madrid and its content. The cloned site published an article, warning about a possible attack on polling stations by the former terrorist group ETA on July 23. No amplification was found on open sources, likely indicating that the FIMI operation was possibly carried out on encrypted private channels or chats. According to third-party information, URLs to the domain were received by private Russian Telegram users residing in Spain[75]. (***Threats 1, 2, 4, 5***).

Phase 4: Four days after the Spanish elections, a mirror account of a Spanish RT show on YouTube published a video providing interpretations of the results of the Spanish elections and claimed that regardless of the outcome, Spain would follow the "wishes" of the leaders of the EU and NATO, and of "Washington, London or Brussels". The video content was later cross-posted on various platforms to maximise the reach. The account is most likely used to bypass the sanctions against RT in the EU (***Threat 4***).

Figure 9: Screenshot of a post from the Telegram account of @EmbajadaRusaEs suggesting a list of sources to follow

Figure 10: Archived version of the now inaccessible website impersonating the official information portal of the Community of Madrid.

(EEAS, 2024)

Annex 6: Covert FIMI operations exploiting events in 2024

Covert FIMI operations exploiting events in 2024

Figure 6: Covert operations and FIMI Booster nodes exploiting events in 2024

(EEAS, 2025)

Annex 7: Portal Kombat

PORTAL KOMBAT

Portal Kombat (also known as the *Pravda network*) was created in 2022 and operates **200 inauthentic media outlets in 35 languages, targeting local and regional audiences across Europe, Africa and Asia**. The network expands through language-specific websites segmented by geography and demographics, including minority groups. Prioritising African influence, it contrasts with False Façade, which focuses on Western audiences. Identified in **73 incidents**, Portal Kombat relies on **high-frequency automated republication of Russian FIMI content**. Initially exposed by VIGINUM, it was **traced to a firm based in Crimea**[46].

Portal Kombat, originally focused on regional audiences in Russia and Ukraine, expanded globally in 2024, registering domains across Europe, Asia and Africa. Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the campaign initially concentrated on shaping narratives around the conflict but later broadened its scope to include other geopolitical issues and local politics.

Rather than creating original content, Portal Kombat relies on automated republication from selected sources, including official Russian government entities, state-affiliated media, Russian Telegram influencers and local anti-establishment outlets. **Despite its low popularity and limited reach, its strategy focuses on saturating local information spaces**. Highly automated systems ensure consistent and low-cost operation. By continuously publishing in local languages, it gradually increases its online presence, often appearing in search engine results at minimal cost.

While initially focusing on websites and social media amplification via platforms like Telegram and VKontakte, **Portal Kombat began making efforts to expand its presence on X in January 2025**.

When coordinating with other covert operations, **Portal Kombat has amplified content from False Façade,** though not in a systematic or consistent manner. In contrast, **it systematically amplifies African Initiative content.**

Annex 8: Doppelganger

DOPPELGÄNGER

Doppelgänger is a FIMI campaign attributed to Russia, active since mid-2022. According to data collected by the EEAS, it **consists of 228 domains and 25,000 CIB networks operating across nine languages**: English, German, French, Spanish, Turkish, Polish, Arabic, Hebrew and Italian. The campaign has a prominent presence within the Russian FIMI infrastructure and has been **linked to 60 documented incidents** in the analysed sample.

Doppelgänger has been widely exposed by international organisations[36] and is **attributed to the firms Struktura and the Social Design Agency (SDA)**. Struktura and SDA are companies directly funded by the Russian state and are involved in interference operations aimed at undermining democracy and eroding international support for Ukraine. Several entities and individuals associated with the campaign have been **sanctioned by the EU**[37], the UK[38] and the US[39].

The main objective of the Doppelgänger campaign is to expand Russian influence globally through audience segmentation and manipulative localised content. Initially focused on impersonating Western news outlets and government websites, **Doppelgänger has evolved into a multi-layered operation**. It deployed networks of thousands of fake domains designed to manipulate platform algorithms, ran sponsored ads on Meta to drive traffic to its deceptive sites, and relied on large-scale CIB networks ensuring widespread distribution. When the amplification occurs in the comment section of accounts belonging to fact-checking organisations, it is known as **Operation Matryoshka**[40].

Over time, the campaign has refined its techniques and has shown **network resilience by adapting to takedowns** by hosting providers and social media platforms. This is achieved through strategies such as re-registering websites under different Top Level Domains (TLDs), migrating to different hosting providers, and using disposable CIB accounts for content amplification. The campaign remains active, **focusing on X and reducing its presence on Telegram and Meta platforms, while extending to new platforms like Bluesky.**

The attribution of Doppelgänger has been made possible through the collection of technical and behavioural indicators, **enabling analysts to identify the systematic repetition of attack patterns**. Proprietary data has confirmed the ownership of the covert operation and its connections to Russian government agencies. **Doppelgänger operates within a closed ecosystem**, functioning as a self-contained cluster with no direct interactions with Russian state official or state-controlled sources. This insular structure suggests a hermetic operational model, reinforcing its autonomy within the broader FIMI landscape.

(EEAS, 2025)

About the Publisher

MNU Center for Global and Regional Governance (CEGREG) was established in 2024 within the International School of Economics at Maqsut Narikbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan. CEGREG is dedicated to advancing research in international relations and governance, with a particular focus on Central Asian perspectives in global debates.

ABOUT US

We are a research center dedicated to advancing global and regional governance studies through Central Asian perspectives. Based at Maqsut Narikbayev University, we promote academic research, student engagement, and international collaboration in the field of international relations.

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