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Understanding foreign policy strategies of Kazakhstan: a case study of the landlocked and transcontinental country

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Abstract *Examining Kazakhstan's foreign policy through the lens of its position as the largest landlocked, and transcontinental, country in the world, the paper presents a multidimensional analysis of the unique soft power strategy adopted recently by this nation in promoting its various international initiatives in its region. In doing so, the paper attempts to understand the implications of Kazakhstan's distinctive geopolitical setting at the heart of Eurasia for regional integration and security-building initiatives that have been proposed and actively supported by this emerging nation. The paper focuses on investigating key political and socioeconomic aspects of the country's location at the intersection of Europe and Asia and analyses whether a symbiotic relationship exists between Kazakhstan's multi-vectored foreign policy and the wide range of its international initiatives aiming to promote economic development, partnership and peaceful coexistence between various nations in the region. The key findings and generalizations of the research will facilitate better understanding of the implications of landlocked geography for the direction of foreign policy, using concrete examples and manifestations of political decisions made in the area.*

Introduction

Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in December 1991 Kazakhstan was declared independent. As a transitional post-totalitarian society, this country experienced dramatic political and socioeconomic transformations that directly affected the development of its foreign policy. In this transition period, it sought external political and financial support for re-building initiatives, including public sector reforms, post-communist infrastructure projects and an overhaul of the administration of the economic sector. Alongside the self-identification of the country as a new member of the international community, over the last three decades the national authorities set as the number one priority the establishment of friendly and strategic relationships with global geopolitical actors, especially with Russia, China, the United States (US) and the European Union (Olcott 1996; Cummings 2003; Anceschi 2014).

Since independence Kazakhstan has become well known globally as a transcontinental, religiously and ethnographically diverse and highly cosmopolitan state, which is geographically situated at the intersection of major transportation routes between Europe and Asia. Moreover, its unique transcontinental geopolitical location, which lacks direct access to world maritime routes, is not only a challenge but also an opportunity to establish foreign and trade policies with other countries (Rywkin 2005; Hanks 2009). The purpose of

this paper is thus to unpack the key aspects of the country's unique geography in order to explore how this geographical constellation should play an imperative role in the development of Kazakhstan's foreign policy. To investigate this relationship, the paper assesses Kazakhstan's active stance in global politics, regional political and economic integration platforms and bilateral intergovernmental initiatives.

Understanding key operational concepts

Before examining the implications of Kazakhstan's landlocked and transcontinental geography for the direction of its external relations with other countries, it is necessary to provide operational definitions of key concepts in this research. Key concepts include the definition of a landlocked and transcontinental nation, and the parameters of multi-vectored foreign policy, exit strategy and soft power. The commonly accepted and used definition of a 'landlocked country' describes it as a nation that is entirely enclosed by the landmass of neighbouring states or inland seas and lakes (Raballand 2003; Faye et al 2004; Arvis et al 2007; Raballand 2008; Idan & Shaffer 2011). In this regard, Kazakhstan, located at the centre of the huge Eurasian supercontinent, is a typical example of a landlocked country. Among other landlocked countries, one might mention Belarus and Hungary in Europe, Bolivia and Paraguay in South America, Central African Republic and Chad in Africa, Nepal and Mongolia in Asia. On the other hand, a 'transcontinental nation' is widely understood in academic literature as a country that is geographically spread over two or more continents (Kayseri-Özer et al 2014; Güner 2015; Issakhov 2015). Kazakhstan is thus also a transcontinental state, situated between Europe and Asia. Among other transcontinental nations are Azerbaijan, Egypt, Georgia, Indonesia, Panama, Turkey and Russia. Another concept widely used in this research is 'multi-vectored foreign policy'. This refers to a diplomatic strategy that is based on maintaining diplomatic relations with the international community, in general, and neighbouring countries, in particular, in a pragmatic and balanced manner (Ipek 2007; Hanks 2009; Mostafa 2013).

'Exit strategy' in foreign policy is another key concept for this research. It is usually understood to refer to a set of approaches adopted by government authorities to address the objective limitations of a country's position in the international arena (Mandelbaum 1996; Rose 1998). Such limitations could be caused by the confines of geography (for example, the presence of mountainous landscape, deserts, volcanoes and highly seismic zones, landlocked location), the existence of potentially perilous militarily and economically much stronger neighbouring countries, lack of access to certain resources (human, water, financial, economic, technological), among other things. The related concept of 'soft power' is widely used today in international relations to describe particular policies adopted by a number of countries to address these challenges (Oğuzlu 2007; Nye 2009). Introduced by Joseph Nye in the late 1980s as the ability to influence the behaviour of other nations to achieve desired outcomes, soft power in international relations can be exercised by coopting targeted international actors rather than coercing them (Nye 1990).

The way that Kazakhstan conducts its foreign relations using a multi-vector foreign policy approach and a wide range of initiatives and activities could be regarded as adding up to the use of exit strategies aiming to alleviate the concrete objective limitations of its landlocked location in the centre of Eurasia, far from seas and oceans.

Methodology

This research is based on three methods of investigation: *context*, *policy* and *discourse analysis*. Context analysis as a method is widely used in political science studies to investigate implications of various environments/contexts in which a political entity (for example, state, political system or regime) exists/functions (Goodin and Tilly 2006). Using context analysis, this article explores the political and economic implications of Kazakhstan's unique landlocked and transcontinental location for its foreign relations. The second method of study, policy analysis, is one of the most widely used tools of investigation in international relations in locating and, ideally, evaluating all possible existing strategies to known challenges of foreign policy (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Hudson 2005). For example, in the context of this research, this method of analysis enables the examination of key implementation strategies and tactics adopted over the last three decades by national authorities in order to maintain external relations with the global community and international organizations, alleviating and leveraging challenges and opportunities. More importantly, this article analyses a variety of strategic documents and political rhetoric relating to foreign policy initiatives through discourse analysis. 'Discourse analysis' is one more popular way to study foreign policy initiatives, and as a method of investigation denotes the study of political opinions in a wide range government institutions (for example, presidential administration, office of prime minister, ministry of foreign affairs, embassies, among others) and international forums on the directions of foreign policy (Wæver 2002; Larsen 2005). For example, in seeking understanding of the key global and regional perspectives on political and economic integration projects, regional security issues and threats shared by Kazakh political leaders, this method complements policy analysis aiming to better understand the implications of landlocked geography in international relations (see Table 1).

There are several strategic foreign policy documents that have been recently adopted by national authorities which this research will analyse. These include, the Foreign Policy Concept of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2014–2020, the National Security Law (Law 527-IV 2012) and the Military Doctrine of Kazakhstan (Presidential Decree 161 2011). The first of these was developed in accordance with guidelines set forth in the presidential message to the people entitled 'Strategy Kazakhstan-2050' in order to systematize and accentuate fundamental perspectives on principles and approaches, goals, priorities and tasks of foreign policy and international relations for the near future (Presidential Decree 741 2014). This strategic document also officially highlighted key directions or vectors of foreign policy which the central government should promote first.

Table 1. Understanding key research questions

Key research questions	Key methods of analysis	Key sources of data	Key expected outcomes
What are the implications of geography for the development of foreign policy in typical landlocked and transcontinental countries?	Context analysis	Literature review and analysis of socioeconomic data such as statistical information, indices and charts derived from the context of typical landlocked states	Understanding the fundamental challenges that the landlocked location in the centre of the Eurasian supercontinent bring to Kazakhstan, on the one hand, and locating key potentials that its transcontinental situation between Asia and Europe could offer in developing or informing foreign policy, on the other
What exit strategies do national authorities adopt in alleviating and leveraging these challenges and potentials, respectively?	Policy and discourse analysis	Key strategic documents and rhetoric adopted by national authorities in maintaining external relations with other nations and international organizations	Understanding implementation strategies and tactics adopted by the Kazakh leadership in balancing between pursuing its own national economic and political interests in international relations as much as possible and leveraging objective limitations and benefits of its geopolitical location as a typical landlocked and transcontinental nation

Kazakhstan as a landlocked country and its implications for foreign policy: literature review

The research background: understanding previous studies in the area

Idan and Shaffer's (2011) article entitled 'The foreign policies of post-Soviet landlocked states' is one of the most influential works to explicitly analyse the implications of a country's landlocked location for its foreign policy. Specifically, they studied the direct implications of the landlocked location of many post-Soviet Central Asian and Caucasian nations, including Kazakhstan, for the development of their external policy initiatives. Instead of focusing on a cross-country comparative analysis, this article focuses on a single case study, Kazakhstan, as it is a non-coastal state and, at the same time, the only transcontinental one among all landlocked nations. The active stance of the country in the international arena and the wide range of foreign policy initiatives recently proposed by Kazakh government, aiming to develop new economic and political integration processes in an explicitly transcontinental manner (Weitz 2008; Nazarbayev 2014), provided a rich empirical basis to research the case in closer detail.

Another interesting publication that analyses the implications of a unique geographical location for the economic and political development of various landlocked nations is a working paper by a group of experts from the World Bank. In their study entitled 'The cost of being landlocked: logistics costs and supply chain reliability' Arvis et al (2007) argue that the vast majority of the poorest nations in the world have no affordable access to global markets through the territory of neighbouring maritime countries, making the development of their landlocked economies highly unpredictable and unsustainable. Another interesting publication is a journal article by Faye et al (2004) entitled 'The challenges facing landlocked developing countries'. These authors argue from their research that the indirect economic dependence of landlocked nations on their transit and coastal neighbours is in fact *multidimensional* and often encompasses political, socioeconomic and organizational challenges that they have to face in accessing global markets. This article builds on these two articles by locating and elaborating on various opportunities that the unique geopolitical context of Kazakhstan provides for its political and socioeconomic development. This seems especially important considering that the vast majority of landlocked economies are highly impoverished (Gallup et al 1999; Landes 2015), which could be regarded as one of the most fundamental challenges for the economic development of Kazakhstan.

Ambrosio and Lange (2014) in 'Mapping Kazakhstan's geopolitical code: an analysis of Nazarbayev's presidential addresses, 1997–2014' argue that it is possible to decode the unique geopolitical viewpoint of Kazakh leaders on regional and global affairs, which helps us to better understand its strategically important relations with foreign nations, and to turn to content analysis of government documents such as presidential addresses, since they shape both the external and domestic politics of this nation. This illuminating and eye-opening paper sheds an additional light on many aspects of Kazakhstan's perspective on its geopolitical situation in the centre of Eurasia right between Russia in the north, China in the east and Central Asia in the south and interprets the uneasy choices—counterbalances and prioritizations in advancing a

multi-vectorized foreign policy—that the Kazakh leadership has to make in order to secure the nation from potential external threats and ensure domestic political and economic stability, at least in the near future.

Among other papers that have partly explored foreign policy of landlocked nations or regions, one might mention works by East (1960), Childs (1971), Lloyd (1997), Hodder et al (1998), Hausmann (2001), Raballand (2003), Chowdhury and Erdenebileg (2006), Diamond (2012), Maasdorp (2014), Paudel and Burke (2015) and, in connection to the context of Kazakhstan, Arvanitopoulos (1998), Ipek (2007), Hanks (2009), Domjan and Stone (2010) and Koch (2013). However, it is necessary to note that the vast majority of studies focus their analysis on the economic and, less often, the political challenges of not having a coast for the development of landlocked nations. These studies do not investigate successful exit strategies in foreign policy through the prism of concrete initiatives, integration and partnership platforms with neighbouring maritime or transit countries. As not just a landlocked nation but also a transcontinental country which regards its unique geography at the centre of the Eurasian supercontinent as both a challenge and an opportunity, promoting various foreign policy initiatives aiming to establish an area of economic cooperation and mutually beneficial trade in the region, Kazakhstan provides an almost ideal example for such case study research.

Indeed, its unique geopolitical location promises potentially advantageous transit and, more importantly, export opportunities. Historically, almost all transcontinental nations in the region, such as Hunnic, Göktürk, Khazarian, Golden Horde, Seljuk and Ottoman khaganates and many other ancient Turkic states and empires, were prosperous before the era of great geographical discoveries and maritime globalization. They have been both politically and militarily extremely influential for many centuries due to their complete control of major transportation and trades routes that connected Asia and Europe at that time. Medieval times were a truly golden age for the Turkic-speaking nomadic and non-coastal nations that had inhabited the Central Asian region for millennia. This period of prosperity resulted in great achievements in sciences, astronomy, philosophy, military art, medicine, postal service technology, monetary politics and merchant businesses and in many other areas (Lombard 1975; Conrad 2012; Starr 2013), enriching both Asian and European civilizations and contributing greatly to the dialogue of cultures and religions. The Great Silk Road is a poster child of this era. The fact that transcontinental Kazakhstan is trying to reanimate its stance as an economic and cultural bridge between East and West in various integration platforms and intergovernmental projects provides an ideal case in which to investigate both the challenges and opportunities of being uniquely landlocked and transcontinental, from historical and modern perspectives.

Kazakhstan: the implications of being landlocked and transcontinental

Looking at the global map, one can see that there are not many nations in the world that span more than one continent. Universally well known as transcontinental nations, Turkey, Russia and, to a lesser degree, Kazakhstan are classic examples of Eurasian countries, situated at the centre of the huge landmass. However, Kazakhstan is particularly unique, since it is not only a

Table 2. The basic economic indicators of typical developing landlocked nations in the Central Asian region

Nation	National annual GDP per capita (US\$)	World Bank global income economy classification	Notes
Afghanistan	562	Low income	Mineral-resource-based economy
Bhutan	2774	Lower middle income	
Kazakhstan	7715	Upper middle income	
Kyrgyzstan	1078	Lower middle income	
Nepal	729	Low income	Mineral-resource-based economy
Mongolia	3694	Lower middle income	
Tajikistan	824	Low income	
Turkmenistan	6389	Upper middle income	
Uzbekistan	2111	Lower middle income	

Source: Elaboration based on data from the World Bank (2016).

transcontinental state, located between Europe and Asia, but also, lesser known, the largest non-coastal country in the world. The paradox of Kazakhstan's situation is that it is both landlocked and transcontinental. On the one hand, in the academic literature landlocked status is usually regarded as a barrier to the economic growth of any nation (Radelet and Sachs 1998; Limao and Venables 2001; Raballand et al 2005; Collier 2008; Raballand 2008). On the other hand, being a transcontinental nation is considered a major advantage, as this is seen as more conducive to the promotion of free trade (Werner 2003; Munro 2006; Finon and Locatelli 2008; Liu 2010; Vinokurov and Libman 2012; Fallon 2015; Li et al 2015). It is interesting to analyse how these sui generis and unique factors of Kazakhstan's complex geopolitical location at the centre of the largest continent, that is, at the intersection of major transportation and logistical routes between the two most economically developed regions of the globe, Europe and East Asia, affect the development of its foreign policy and trade and, more importantly, help us to understand its intermediary role in global politics. Therefore, the international initiatives of Kazakhstan in promoting regional economic integration, political stability and security will be best appreciated if analysed through the prism of the implications that this status as a typical landlocked and transcontinental country may have for the political and socioeconomic development of Kazakhstan.

The price of being landlocked: understanding fundamental challenges

Economic implications: logistics and lack of access to global maritime trade routes.. Surrounded by Russia in the north, China in the east, the Caspian Sea in the west and the Central Asian republics of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in the south, Kazakhstan is a classic non-coastal nation. The main disadvantage of such a geographical situation is a lack of direct access to the world oceans through which a large percentage of international maritime trade is carried out today (Fink et al 2002). Considering the fundamental

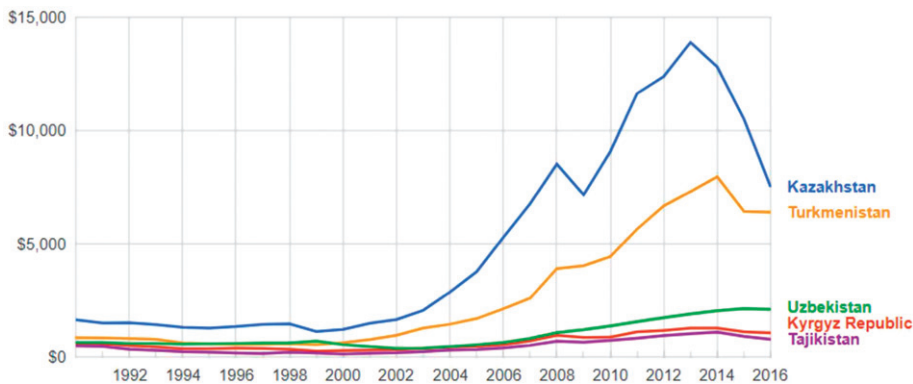


FIGURE 1. The recent dramatic fall of the annual GDP per capita in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan (US\$)

Source: Elaboration based on data from the World Bank (2016).

limitations posed by landlocked geography, which affects trade with global markets (Lima and Venables 2001), the sustainable economic development of any non-coastal nation depends on maintaining friendly relationship with neighbouring countries (MacKellar et al 2000; Raballand 2003). Previous studies have demonstrated that the vast majority of landlocked countries on the globe are low-income nations (Arvis et al 2010). This factor also constrains the development of the Kazakh economy. Moreover, the scale of the challenge is magnified by the fact that today the economic development of the nation mainly depends on extensive exploration of its mineral resources (Ipek 2007) and, more importantly, their export to global commodity markets through the territory of transit countries (Bahgat 2007; Ostrowski 2010). For example, according to data provided by the World Bank in its annual global income classification (World Bank 2016), almost all landlocked nations in Central Asia are either low-income or lower-middle-income economies. Furthermore, looking at the sizes of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, one can easily notice that only mineral-resource-rich Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have relatively high income levels in the region due to huge investments in oil, gas and metallurgical industries in the early 2000s. All the other countries are extremely impoverished (see Table 2). However, the recent drop in prices of key mineral commodities that these two nations have traditionally exported to external markets has led to economic depression, especially in Kazakhstan, in contrast to the quite stable situation in the other landlocked yet not so lop-sidedly mineral-resource-based economies in the region such as Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (see Figure 1).

Political implications: being under a permanent threat of political pressure from neighbouring countries. The main political implication of landlocked nations is that governments often have to correlate the direction of their foreign policy and sometimes even domestic affairs with political and socioeconomic situations in transit states, since their development indirectly depends on peace and stability within neighbouring countries (Faye et al 2004; Idan and Shaffer 2011). Any political crisis, social tensions or military conflicts in transit

countries may affect negatively the foreign trade of non-coastal nations too, thus severely undermining their economic development and social and political stability. Moreover, hypothetically, coastal nations always have an opportunity to levy higher transit fees on their landlocked neighbours, arguably as an effective indirect instrument of political influence and economic pressure (Lloyd 1997; Arvis et al 2010). This is especially true when it comes to landlocked countries that border only a small number of neighbours, resulting in fewer options for manoeuvrability in external relations and diversification of trade routes. In this regard, even though Kazakhstan is surrounded by five countries, which at first glance means that it may have better options to promote multi-vectored foreign policy (Cummings 2003), only two of its neighbours, namely Russia and China, have direct access to the world ocean through their sea ports in the Atlantic, Arctic and Pacific Oceans. The other three neighbouring Central Asian republics, namely Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, with which Kazakhstan shares its southern borders, are landlocked themselves. In fact, all nations in the region, including Afghanistan, Bhutan, Mongolia, Nepal and Tajikistan, are non-coastal states. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, surrounded only by inland neighbours, are doubly landlocked nations. This situation makes the whole area really interesting when it comes to understanding the implications of its unique inland geography for the political and socioeconomic development of people who live there.

Implications of being transcontinental: understanding economic and political opportunities

Economic implications: being situated between two global markets—China and Europe. It is necessary to note that among all these inland nations in the region, Kazakhstan is the only one that is also a transcontinental country, which presumably promises better options to alleviate the price of being landlocked both economically and politically. Historically, the main advantage of being transcontinental is in the transit potential (Krugman 1991; Panzac 1992). Kazakhstan is able to counterbalance the economic implications of its non-coastal location by leveraging all available transit resources that it has at its disposal. Being situated right at the centre of the largest continent, it plays an important role as the logistical bridge between Europe and Asia (Otsuka 2001; Anceschi 2014), since many communication and transport corridors that could hypothetically connect the two regions would have to cross its territory (Hanks 2009; Mukhtarova et al 2016). In this respect, being predominantly a commodity exporter, Kazakhstan is known to diversify its export routes as much as possible (Babali 2009; Collins and Bekenova 2017a), and participate in various transcontinental and cross-border economic initiatives with all neighbouring countries. The development of an ambitious international project, the New Silk Road (Fedorenko 2013), which is supported by China and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to potentially connect two remote regions of Eurasia logistically, is one of the most promising examples of the trend in this direction. As was announced by the Chinese government, the new transcontinental road 'is expected to change the world political and economic landscape through the development of countries along the routes, most of which are eager for fresh growth' (Xinhua Agency 2015). Being geographically located

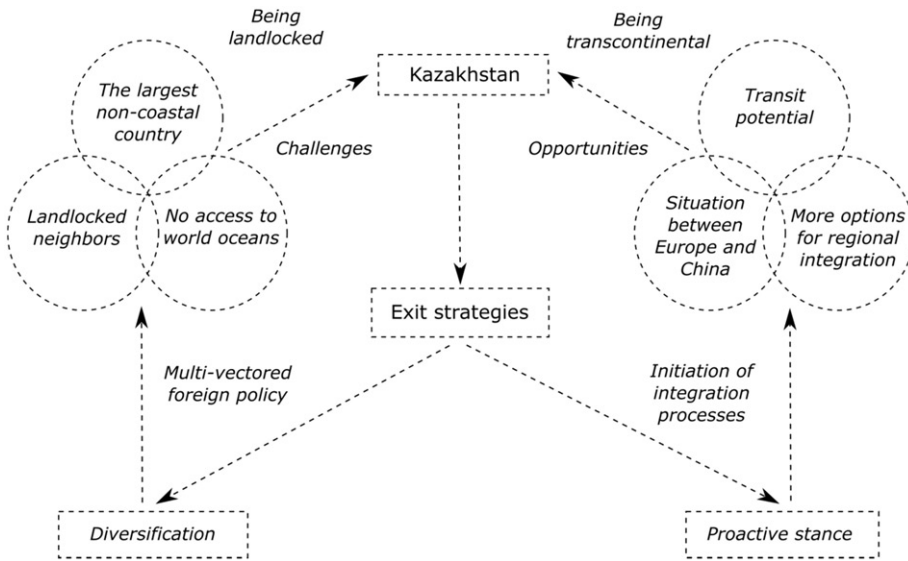


FIGURE 2. The challenges and opportunities of a landlocked and transcontinental location with respect to Kazakhstan's exit strategy in diplomacy

between China and the European Union, in other words, between the world's second-largest economy and arguably the largest global consumer market, Kazakhstan has the potential to participate in helping to build transitional transport networks and logistics which eventually may provide a robust economic basis to develop a sustainable economy for generations ahead. This would eventually enable Kazakhstan to wean itself from its lopsided dependence on the mineral industry.

Political implications: new opportunities for Kazakhstan to play a role as mediator in global affairs. The arguably advantageous geography of transcontinental countries enables these countries to join different international, intergovernmental political and economic associations and institutions of various kinds, which are usually organized on geographical and regional principles. For instance, notwithstanding being a predominantly Asian nation and member of the Olympic Council of Asia, the unique transcontinental status of Kazakhstan, between Europe and Asia, allowed the country to join the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) in 2002. From that moment on, many national and local football clubs have performed at the continental level, establishing new professional and personal links with the European region. Likewise, from a political and economic perspective, being partly located in Europe, Kazakhstan is also an active member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This enabled its capital city Astana to become an official host of the 2010 OSCE political summit during the country's chairmanship of this organization that year. The summit has been actually convened for the first time in more than ten years, that is, since the last meeting of the organization in Istanbul in 1999. Notably, Kazakhstan is the first post-Soviet and predominantly Asian country that has led this European intergovernmental

organization. One more example of the gravitational force of the European Union on the development of Kazakhstan is the Bologna Process which has led to reforms in education and scientific communities in accordance with European standards and benchmarks (Kassen 2018). Furthermore, hypothetically, Kazakhstan has the potential to develop a strategic and even special associate relationship with the European Union, Council of Europe and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in promoting mutually beneficial economic, political and even military cooperation. These partnerships could help this transcontinental nation to diversify its foreign policy options and claim the status of a poster child in multi-vectorism in modern international relations.

Foreign policy of Kazakhstan: diversification and proactive stance in foreign relations as an exit strategy

The essence of Kazakhstan's foreign policy could be described as balancing between pursuing its own national interests in international relations and leveraging the objective limitations and benefits of its geopolitical location (see Figure 2). For example, in accordance with Item 2 of the Foreign Policy Concept of Kazakhstan for 2014–2020, the principles of diverse approach, balance, pragmatism, mutual benefit and solid defence of its national interests constitute key priorities for state authorities in maintaining external affairs with other countries (Presidential Decree 741 2014). In this regard, the strategy pursued by the Kazakh government in international relations is often referred to as 'multi-vector foreign policy'. Politically, international relations based on this form of diplomacy are mainly non-ideological, as 'the character of government and internal policies of potential partners, and their geopolitical relationship with other states are not variables that direct or even inform the multi-vector approach' (Hanks 2009, 259). This potentially allows it to be more flexible in implementing various foreign policy initiatives and platforms for dialogue. It is interesting to note that, typically, landlocked status is conducive to a national policy of neutrality and even political isolationism as a strategy in foreign affairs. Switzerland, traditionally known for its neutrality in international relations, is a classical landlocked country. Turkmenistan, another landlocked nation located like Kazakhstan in Central Asia, is also a good example of political neutrality. However, in the case of Kazakhstan neither isolationism nor neutrality is possible, mainly due to the unique transcontinental location and size of the country. In this regard, the multi-vector diplomacy of Kazakhstan cannot be regarded as fully non-ideological, as relationships with the country's main allies and partners in the global arena certainly informs the overall direction of its diplomacy. Therefore, its foreign policy is best understood through reviewing its proactive participation in regional integration processes.

Understanding the post-Soviet vector of foreign policy of Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is traditionally well known among the post-Soviet countries for its proactive stance in initiating various regional integration projects and building

platforms, especially in terms of mutually beneficial socioeconomic cooperation between the former republics of the Soviet Union, including those which aim to promote regional security, economic development and regional stability (Dutkiewicz and Sakwa 2014; Dreyer and Popescu 2014; Tarr 2016). Kazakhstan is an active member of the Custom Union (CU), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), amongst others. Given the close cooperation between Kazakhstan and the other former republics of the Soviet Union, especially Belarus and Russia (Kazantsev 2008; Astrov et al 2012; Tarr 2014), the government of Kazakhstan insists that the nature of the partnership in these integration platforms is purely economic. These partnerships were aimed to create, within the territory of three nations, a single economic union and unambiguously indicate that any interference in its political independence will be regarded by Kazakhstan as formally sufficient to leave any of these organizations (Hartwell 2013; Laruelle 2015). As was indicated in the National Security Law of Kazakhstan, the defence of genuine national interests in the international arena and the security of the stable political and economic development of the country in promoting its foreign policy are number one priorities (Law 527-IV 2012).

As has been frequently reiterated by high-level officials in the political leadership, Russia has been the foremost strategic partner of Kazakhstan, whether with respect to economic, military or social concerns. The simple facts that the Kazakh–Russian border line is the longest in the world after the US–Canadian one and that significant Russian and Kazakh diasporas reside in the adjacent regions of Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation, respectively, are indicative enough that the two countries are destined to interact closely. Military cooperation with Russia is specifically indicated in the Military Doctrine of Kazakhstan, which emphasizes measures to build a collective defence system (Presidential Decree 161) against any potential threats and aggression from third countries. Another dimension that connects ordinary people in these two nations is that the vast majority of Kazakhs are fluent in Russian and are prepared to use it in everyday communication. Lastly, Kazakhstan and Russia enjoy a mutually beneficial trade and investment relationship. For example, the annual trade turnover between Kazakhstan and Russia in 2016 was more than US\$12 billion, which was equal to 20 per cent of the total trade turnover of the nation with other countries, which was equal to US\$62 billion (The Ministry of National Economy of Kazakhstan, MNEK 2017), in a number of economic areas. These include food import, oil and gas export routes, the production of industrial and construction materials, and cooperation in the space industry and military.

However, at present, the number one challenge for Kazakhstan is how to manage the potential repercussions of sanctions from the West (mostly, the European Union and US) and Russia which may hit its weak lopsided economy, which depends heavily on the export of mineral resources and the importing of almost all basic necessities that the country and its population require—such as food, clothes, cars and technological equipment. The simple fact is that Kazakhstan is in one team with Russia and Belarus, at least when it comes to the integration of national economies into a single economic space after the creation of the CU in May 2014. Especially after the final formation of the Single

Eurasian Economic Union in 2015, this raises a reasonable question—whether Kazakhstan is really ready to pay the high economic and possibly political price of this partnership. Furthermore, as a result of the military escalation in Eastern Ukraine the political leadership of Kazakhstan is confronted with two unpleasant questions. The first one is whether there is a possibility of the same scenario on its own territory, if one takes into account the diverse ethnic composition of its population. Secondly, how to minimize the potential effects of Western anti-Russian economic sanctions and retaliatory Russian anti-Western actions given Kazakhstan's close economic integration with the Russian Federation, on the one hand, and active economic ties with the US and many European countries, on the other (a paradoxical result of its multi-vectored foreign policy over the last two decades of independence). The traditional neutral stance adopted by Kazakhstan in any political relationship between Russia and the West might be affected too owing to the high dependence of its economy on imports. For example, Russia's measures to close its economic space to foreign agricultural products have led to higher prices for food in both Russia, as it is not able to meet all demands domestically, and Kazakhstan due to unpreventable export of cheaper agricultural products to the former, given the open borders between the two partners of the CU. In turn, higher prices hit consumers and even create political risks for the existing status quo, that is, to an unspoken social agreement with civil society, which until recently has guaranteed public support for the regime and stability for domestic political reforms owing to relatively high standards of living (Ambrosio 2015).

Another direction for the future of foreign policy in the post-Soviet region is potentially beneficial collaboration with other post-Soviet Caucasian and Central Asian republics, namely, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, within a prospective Central Asian Union, the creation of which was proposed by Kazakhstan in 2007. Considering common historic, linguistic, cultural and civilizational roots that all these nations share with each other (Zardykhon 2002; Swanström 2004; Bohr 2004), which can be traced back to the times of the Huns, a really close political and economic alliance within their territory should be regarded as a next logical step in further integration of the region, a collaboration that could be valuable for all these countries in many respects. This type of cooperation could benefit these related and brethren nations and could help them to increase political and military security and ensure brighter options for economic development and coordination within a single alliance, ideally with the creation of a single economic union, single army, single visa regime and single banking system and currency. However, occasional border disputes, the huge gaps in economic development between these countries and, more importantly, different visions of national leaders in these states for the level of political and economic cooperation have significantly slowed the further integration of Central Asia (Gleason 2001; Luong 2004; Allison 2008; Zakhirova 2012; 2013), leaving only the smallest ideological window for potential integration in the region in the future. Another dimension of cooperation is the work of intergovernmental platforms, such as the Turkic Council and the International Organization of Turkic Culture, which aim to promote collaboration and networking among all Turkic-speaking states.

The key aspects of the post-Soviet turn in foreign policy:

- *The focus nations*: Russia, Belarus and the Central Asian republics of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.
- *Key areas of activity*: further economic integration within the Eurasian Customs Union and, less importantly, political integration within the Collective Security Treaty Organization.
- *Key integration projects*: Eurasian Customs Union and Collective Security Treaty Organization.
- *Promises*: economic cooperation with other post-Soviet nations, especially with Russia, opens great opportunities for local businesses to access new consumer markets, which could provide a robust foundation for sustainable development of an otherwise lopsided landlocked economy.
- *Challenges*: the rising political and economic confrontation of Russia with the West and the categorical stance of the former in pursuing its goals in global and regional politics may put its allies, including Kazakhstan, in situations that could significantly challenge their economic development or multi-vectored foreign policy.

Understanding the Asian vector of Kazakhstan's foreign policy

The Asian vector has always been important in the foreign policy direction of Kazakhstan since its emergence as an independent state in 1991, especially with regard to its relationship with key players in the region such as China, India, Pakistan and Iran. For example, Kazakhstan has been a member of the Shanghai Five since the creation of this regional security organization in 1996. The organization, which was renamed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) after the inclusion of Uzbekistan in 2001, aims to promote security and cooperation in the region (Maksutov 2006). At the moment the SCO consists of eight countries: China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Furthermore, from the perspective of its transit potential, Kazakhstan is also regarded today as an important partner in the realization of the Europe–China transcontinental highway, an ambitious transportation project, sometimes called the New Silk Road (Rolland 2015; Li et al 2015), since significant parts of the motorway and railway routes will cross the territory of Kazakhstan. This project not only could promote the development of the Kazakh economy and its transport infrastructure but also would help reinforce its regional economic influence. Another direction for Kazakh foreign policy in Asia is the close cooperation with Pakistan, Turkey and other neighbouring nations within the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), which aims to further the sustainable development of the region and create a single market for the movement of goods and labour (Cordier 1996; Pomfret 2000; Naribaev 2008). One more dimension of cooperation is the close relationship with the Islamic world, especially with Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In this respect, the introduction of the Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan–Iran railway line, which connects Central Asia with seaports in the Persian Gulf, is one of the most promising logistical projects for the whole region, as it helps to alleviate the obvious limitations of their landlocked location.

However, it is necessary to note that China occupies a special place in the geopolitical coordination of Kazakhstan's foreign policy in the Asian continent.

The promotion of a close relationship with the second-largest economy in the world is in many ways a high priority for Kazakh national authorities. The fact that the annual trade turnover between Kazakhstan and China exceeded US\$8 billion in 2016 alone, which is equal to 12 per cent of the total turnover volume, clearly demonstrates how this relationship is shaping Kazakhstan's foreign policy. Industries such as chemical production, oil refining and machinery and metallurgical and other industries in Kazakhstan are closely interconnected with Chinese investments in the national economy. For example, in 2012 alone the government of China provided US\$1.1 billion for the reconstruction of oil refineries in Western Kazakhstan. Regions such as Aktobe, Karaganda and East Kazakhstan oblasts have close relationships with various Chinese corporations. Another dimension of cooperation is found in large-scale transcontinental logistical initiatives such as the Silk Road Economic Belt in Central Asia (Kassenova 2017), the creation of special economic zones and cargo hubs along the Kazakh–Chinese border. For instance, various Chinese companies plan to invest around US\$2 billion in 19 agricultural and farming projects across Kazakhstan alone as part of Beijing's New Silk Road initiative (Farchy 2016a). This specific logistical project aims mainly to create extended food clusters in regions of Kazakhstan through which the new transcontinental motorway and train routes will pass. These clusters will be built in order to ensure the sustainable development of Kazakhstan. The country being a neighbour on China's western borders, this will directly help develop favourable infrastructure and, more importantly, a positive socio-economic environment around this gigantic logistical initiative. In total, China has invested more than US\$30 billion in the mining, oil, gas, transport, chemical and agricultural sectors of the Kazakh economy (Frolovskiy 2016). This is probably one of the reasons why Mandarin, after English, is the most popular language to learn among young Kazakhs (Farchy 2016b).

The New Silk Road project, which is actively promoted today by the Chinese government in all Central Asian countries, as a platform may not only guarantee an impetus for sustainable development in the whole landlocked region, but also promise huge investments in local economies and open the region to both Europe and Asia (for example, in ensuring the importing of new technologies, foundation of new industries, creation of jobs, tourism). However, it is also necessary to note that the increasing interest of major powers in Central Asia may turn the whole region into an arena for geopolitical exercises and competition, which would bring with it not only a wide set of obvious benefits for local economies but also certain risks, mostly of a political character, especially in a long-term perspective. The most tangible concern relates to the high chance that the global powers would be interested in upholding the existing status quo by supporting conservative political systems, perhaps turning them into puppet regimes in the future, in order to ensure economic and therefore political stability in this part of the world, even if it would stifle progress in terms of the democratic development of modern political institutions.

The key aspects of the Asian turn in foreign policy:

- *The focus nations:* China, India, and Iran.

- *Key areas of activity*: participation in ambitious projects such as the Turkmenistan–Iran–Persian Gulf and Beijing’s Silk Road Belt initiatives as a transit country and, less importantly, political cooperation with China within the Shanghai Organization of Cooperation.
- *Key integration projects*: the New Silk Road initiative and Shanghai Organization of Cooperation.
- *Promises*: the New Silk Road, which is actively promoted today by the Chinese government in all Central Asian countries as a platform that could guarantee an impetus for sustainable development in the whole landlocked region, the promise of huge investments in local economies and the opening up of the region to both Europe and Asia through the importing of new technologies, new industries and the creation of new jobs through tourism.
- *Challenges*: the increasing interest of major powers in Central Asia may turn the whole region into an arena for geopolitical exercises and competition, which would bring with it not only a wide set of obvious benefits but also certain perils for local economies. Probably, the most real concerns relate to quite high chances that global powers would be interested in maintaining the existing status quo via quite conservative political systems there, perhaps turning them into puppet regimes.

Understanding the Western vector of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy

One of the greatest achievements of Kazakh diplomacy is the establishment of partnership with the US (Saudabayev 2005; Starr et al 2014; Rumer et al 2016) and countries of the European Union. The close strategic ties between Kazakhstan and the US were commemorated during the Atlantic Council Conference on Twenty Years of Kazakhstan’s Independence on 31 January 2012 (Blake 2012). It is necessary to note that the US, along with Turkey, was the first nation in the world to diplomatically recognize Kazakhstan as a sovereign nation shortly after the declaration of its independence in 1991. Kazakhstan also actively cooperates with NATO by participating in the Partnership for Peace Program, the Individual Partnership Action Plan and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council which aim to promote closer military and political collaboration with the alliance (Wishnick 2002; McDermott 2007; Sharip 2009). Furthermore, the adoption of ‘The Path to Europe’ in 2008 allowed Kazakhstan to achieve a new level of cooperation with the European Union (Laruelle 2014), especially with Germany, France and the United Kingdom. For example, ‘The Year of Kazakhstan in Germany’ in 2009 and ‘The Year of Germany in Kazakhstan’ in 2010 symbolized a high level of political, economic and, more importantly, cultural partnership between these two nations (Brown 2005; Sheryazdanova 2014; Collins and Bekenova 2017b).

In December 2016, to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the diplomatic relationship between the US and Kazakhstan, the two countries reciprocally introduced ten-year business and tourism visas for their citizens (Kazakh Embassy in the US 2016; US Embassy in Kazakhstan 2016). The plan to introduce direct non-stop transcontinental flights between Astana and major US cities in 2018–2019 could also help to boost relations between the citizens of these

two friendly nations and to facilitate further business cooperation. In addition, in order to promote the cooperation between American and Central Asian counterparts in supporting various regional security initiatives, in early 2018 leaders of Kazakhstan and the US also committed themselves to addressing shared challenges in Central Asia through the international dialogue format of the C5+1 partnership, which will include the landlocked nations Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, on the one hand, and the US, on the other (White House 2018). As argued by Ambrosio and Lange (2014), any cooperation with Western nations, especially with the US, could be regarded as a buffer for all these landlocked nations against the influence of Russia and China in the region. In this regard, it should be noted that, in general, the various directions of multi-vectored foreign policy could present a wide range of promises and challenges for the national authorities, and that to promote such a policy as an effective tactic in relations with other countries it may be necessary to develop well-thought-out strategies and approaches on how to balance between the interests of major powers in the region, trying to alleviate the objective limitations of landlocked location and, at the same time, pursue genuine national interests in external relations where it is possible.

The key aspects of the pro-Western turn in foreign policy:

- *The focus nations*: the US and European Union.
- *Key areas of activity*: further promotion of 'open door' policy in advancing economic cooperation with Western investors, especially in the oil, gas and metallurgical industries; introducing a visa-free regime for citizens of OECD countries in order to attract investors and tourists.
- *Key integration projects*: cooperation in oil field exploration in the Caspian Sea, such as the Tengiz and Karachaganak projects, and technological modernization of the country (for example, the creation of joint stock companies with the likes of General Electric and Chevron); political partnership in ensuring nuclear security and nonproliferation on a global scale and providing transit and infrastructural facilities for the International Coalition's military operations in Afghanistan.
- *Promises*: the close economic and possibly political cooperation of local economies with Western countries may promise certain economic dividends and even guarantee political stability and security in the region. Therefore, the partnership with Western countries, especially with the US and European Union, could be regarded as a hedge against the increasing influence of Russia and China in the region, providing a counterbalance in the landlocked countries' maintaining a multi-vectored policy in their relationship with the rest of the world.
- *Challenges*: the increasing interest of major powers in Central Asia may turn the whole region into an arena for geopolitical exercises and competition, which would bring with it not only a wide set of obvious benefits but also certain perils for local economies. Once again, the main concerns relate to chances that global powers would be interested in the maintaining existing status quo, supporting further the quite conservative political systems in these countries.

The proactive stance of Kazakhstan: participating in a wide range of regional integration platforms

Being an active member of an extremely wide range of international political and economic organizations, Kazakhstan plays an important role in many integration processes. One of its regional ambitions is integration within the Eurasian continent and the creation of a single market area with neighbouring countries. Moreover, this nation is globally well known for developing this sort of initiative in the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, a multilateral intergovernmental forum for enhancing cooperation and promoting peace, security and stability in the Asian continent as well as the creation of the International Low Enriched Uranium Bank, which could dramatically enhance the global stance of this Central Asian nation in advancing the regime of nuclear nonproliferation. Also, trying to promote regional stability and development, Kazakhstan provides substantial financial and technical assistance to Afghanistan in building schools and hospitals, constructing highways, providing university education grants for youth and supplying food aid for the local population. This could be regarded as a major achievement in Kazakh diplomacy in recent years. Despite its status as a transcontinental and landlocked country, Kazakhstan regards its geopolitical location between Europe and Asia as equally a challenge and an opportunity in its sustainable development in many spheres. Trying to become an important actor in regional integration and economic development, Kazakhstan is beginning to play a more active geopolitical role in the world, tentatively applying its soft power as a friendly nation.

Kazakhstan's chairmanship in the OSCE

In 2010, Kazakhstan headed the OSCE, the world's largest regional security organization. It was the first post-Soviet and predominantly Asian country to lead this authoritative and powerful transcontinental organization, and could be regarded as a major political achievement of Kazakh diplomacy in recent years (Melvin 2009; Marotte 2010). On 1–2 December 2010 Kazakhstan managed to convene the OSCE Summit in its capital city of Astana; the first summit of the OSCE that had been convened over the past decade. The outcome of the event was the adoption of the Astana Commemorative Declaration, which gave a new political impetus to the development of the organization and reconfirmed the commitments of all member states to maintain security and cooperation in Europe (OSCE 2010), especially in reconciling parties in various frozen conflicts, for example, in the Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh regions (Zellner 2010; Kemp 2010; Easttime 2011) in order to turn the European continent and, indeed, all post-Soviet territory into a conflict-free area. The relentless aspiration of the Kazakh leadership to chair the OSCE in 2010 was partly dictated by the wish to raise the economic agenda of all landlocked nations in the international arena and draw the interest of European partners to the challenges that local economies are facing in the area. For example, in preparing for this global position, in 2009, the government of Kazakhstan indicated that the promotion of transport and transit corridors through landlocked Central Asia would be a major objective of its OSCE chairmanship (Assenova and Bugajski 2009).

Kazakhstan as a potential promoter of all landlocked countries' interests

There are many landlocked countries on the globe. In fact, about one in five countries is non-coastal, to a greater or lesser degree (Arvis et al 2010, 1). As the world's largest landlocked country, Kazakhstan may be regarded as a good candidate to take a leadership position in promoting the interests of all landlocked nations. For example, on 25–29 August 2003, under the auspices of the United Nations (UN), Kazakhstan hosted the International Ministerial Conference of Landlocked and Transit Developing Countries in its former capital city of Almaty. It was the first international forum that aimed primarily to mitigate the constraints in international trade which all landlocked countries are facing today by establishing effective transit systems. The first-draft visions of these transit systems were eventually declared in the Almaty Programme of Action and Almaty Declaration during the event. These documents established the commitment of the international community to address the needs of all landlocked countries by targeting three main priorities: ensuring the recognition of freedom of transit in international agreements, developing transport infrastructure and promoting transnational cooperation (Arvis et al 2010, 3). The Almaty Declaration is universally regarded as a key instrument of international regulation in the area. Moreover, on 14–16 July 2014, Kazakhstan organized a summit for the permanent representatives to the UN from all landlocked developing countries in order to promote the exchange of knowledge and provide lessons on how to address the common challenges that these nations face today in external relations (Nurbekov 2014). Also, on 16–17 May 2018, Astana hosted a special ministerial meeting of landlocked nations to further address these challenges, identify opportunities and propose best practices in boosting trade and transit for all countries that have no access to the sea.

Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA)

Since the first months of independence, Kazakhstan has tried to enhance regional security in Asia, in particular, by convening CICA. The initiative to convene CICA was first initiated by the Kazakh delegation in 1992 at the forty-seventh session of the UN General Assembly. As an international multi-lateral platform of regional political cooperation, the organization aims to promote peace, security and stability in Asia (CICA 2017). Since the First Meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, organized in Kazakhstan in 1999, all political and administrative decisions within the forum are taken by consensus. At present, this organization consists of 26 member states, which account for nearly 90 per cent of the territory and population of Asia. A secretariat, an administrative organ of the organization, is located in the city of Almaty. In this regard, the widely accepted status of Kazakhstan as a mediator in Asia creates a promising platform for the future economic and political integration of all countries in the region. It presents favourable conditions for the possible future formation of the Asian Union, an idea that has until recently been regarded as a practically impossible enterprise to realize, given the various border disputes between nations in the region, different ideological visions of political models of nation-building and, more importantly, huge gaps in economic

development. As was highlighted by Madina Jarbussynova, permanent representative of Kazakhstan to the UN, at the International Conference on Financing for Development, held on 21 March 2002 in Monterrey (Mexico), the promotion of new trade routes and external financing is extremely important for the development of the economically most vulnerable developing countries, especially landlocked ones, including through the mechanism of CICA (UN 2002).

The creation of the International Low Enriched Uranium Bank in Kazakhstan

The agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to create a Low Enriched Uranium Bank in Kazakhstan (IAEA 2015) and its official opening on 29 August 2017 at the Ulba Metallurgical Plant in the City of Oskemen (Eastern Kazakhstan region) is another platform that could dramatically increase the global weight of this Central Asian nation in the international arena and, potentially, increase its national security owing to the simple fact that the global community of nations would be interested in the political and economic stability of a state where vast volumes of uranium for the whole world are deposited, produced and stored for global atomic energy needs. Given the universally well-known positive image of Kazakhstan in nuclear nonproliferation activities, this country is widely regarded in the world as an ideal place for a Low Enriched Uranium Bank (*Washington Post* 2017). Astana has also been actively involved in achieving the milestone international agreement on Iran's nuclear programme as part of P5+1 talks, hosting a series of top-level political negotiations and diplomatic platforms for all interested parties in relevant talks and meetings.

Reconstruction of Afghanistan and KazAid agency

The reconstruction of war-torn Afghanistan is one of the key priorities in the national foreign policy agenda. In promoting regional security and stability, Kazakhstan has greatly contributed to the modernization of this impoverished landlocked nation. For example, it has provided significant financial and technical expertise as well as food aid (Laruelle 2011) and scholarships for Afghan youth to study in leading Kazakh universities and colleges (Nichol 2013; Kukeeva 2013). In 2011 the government of Kazakhstan generously pledged US\$50 million to directly fund education cooperation between the two countries (McDermott 2011), which allowed thousands of talented Afghan students to receive globally recognized university diplomas and invaluable international experience in Kazakhstan, creating a promising new foundation on which to establish truly friendly relations between the people of these two nations. In addition, the Kazakh nation also participates in funding projects aiming to create basic infrastructure in Afghanistan. During Kazakhstan's chairmanship of the OSCE in 2010, the Afghan agenda was actively promoted. Kazakhstan is also committed to providing foreign assistance to other developing countries in the Central Asian and Caucasian regions, especially to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Georgia. For this purpose, KazAID, a specialized humanitarian foreign aid agency, was created in 2014 (Sieff and Witte 2014). This decision

clearly signals the ambition of Kazakhstan to increase its global prestige, political and socioeconomic influence, and image in the international arena. It should be noted that the humanitarian presence of Kazakhstan in Afghanistan is also dictated by pragmatic factors. As stated by Yerlan Idrissov, Kazakh Foreign Minister: 'For us in Kazakhstan, Afghanistan provides a direct route to a huge market and *as a landlocked country*, it is our closest way to international shipping waters' (Standish 2014). Therefore, the stable development of this war-torn country will be of vital interest to Kazakh national authorities in the years ahead.

The chairmanship of Kazakhstan in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation

In 2011, Kazakhstan was presented with the honour of leading the influential intergovernmental platform called the Conference of Islamic Cooperation, which was renamed on the initiative of Kazakh diplomats as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in order to better indicate its political and socioeconomic purpose and role as an integration and networking platform for all Muslim societies in the world, regardless of sectarian and political divisions. During the thirty-eighth session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the organization in June 2011, as chair of this respected forum, Kazakhstan encouraged all Islamic nations to pay special attention to the technological modernization of their countries (Akorda 2011). In particular Kazakhstan promoted the development of science and knowledge in the hope of stimulating an Islamic Golden Age renaissance in technological progress and the advancement of global leadership in academia and financial and economic services, especially in the space industry, nanotechnology, biotechnology, information and communication technologies, electronic commerce, trade and the food industry.

The OIC held its first specialized summit on science and technology at the level of heads of states and governments in the capital city of Kazakhstan, Astana, on 10–11 September 2017, which eventually resulted in the adoption of the Astana Declaration on Science, Technology, Innovation and Modernization in Islamic World (Astana Declaration 2017). Taking into account their huge human capital, rich and diverse cultural legacy, and possession of immense deposits of mineral resources, further cooperation and an intrinsic focus on technological development and education could potentially help the most impoverished and economically weak countries in the region to thrive and prosper. For example, by creating a single market for the free flow of labour and goods, a single currency and independent monetary fund, single custom union, interconnected banking systems, and development funds, such cooperation could turn the whole region into a truly self-sustainable and independent civilizational realm. This, in turn, could help the nations better defend their genuine interests in the international arena and compete politically, economically and technologically alike on par with global powers. In this regard, the new political will of all Islamic countries, the transformation of the traditional mindset of authoritarian and oppressive political regimes in the region and the revival of the once lost and forgotten cult of technological progress and rigour could help to achieve the goal of economic prosperity.

Comprising more than 50 member states and a combined population of approximately 1.6 billion people and spread over four continents, the OIC is the largest international organization after the UN in terms of participating nations and geographic coverage. The proactive stance of Kazakhstan in this highly reputable organization in the developing world is helping to increase the positive image of the nation in the international arena. As was stated by Yerlan Idrissov, Kazakh Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kazakhstan is trying to promote the genuine political and economic interests of all Central Asian countries in the organization, for example, by establishing the OIC Action Plan for cooperation in the region. Another initiative includes the creation of the OIC Food Security Institution in Astana, which aims to ensure the distribution of food aid among all Muslim nations. Kazakhstan is also actively engaged in various humanitarian missions in OIC nations. For example, Kazakhstan launched a campaign that helped to raise more than half a billion US dollars for relief programmes for Somalia (Weitz 2013) and also actively participated in humanitarian fund-raising programmes in order to aid the Rohingya people in Myanmar (Zhalil 2018).

The Astana Economic Forum (AEF): proposing an alternative discussion platform for the global economy

The AEF is another initiative that was proposed by Kazakhstan. The AEF provides an international platform where economists, politicians, scholars and journalists from both developed and emerging nations can gather to discuss various topics relating to the development of the global and local economy, finding the best solutions for challenges that the international community is facing today (Varpahovskis 2017). The forum is recognized as a promising discussion platform to promote global economic dialogue in the developing world (AEF 2017). The event itself is annually convened in Astana and usually brings more than 8000 delegates from more than 100 countries and regions of the world, famous economists and political scientists, heads of governments, prime ministers, senators and deputies of parliaments, renowned public figures, businesspersons, journalists, representatives of non-governmental organizations and charities, Nobel laureates, amongst others, to discuss various topics relating to economic development from both a regional and global perspective. One other initiative, which was promoted during the Astana Economic Forum from 17 to 19 May 2018, is the creation of the International Financial Centre in Astana, which is intended to play the role of a financial hub for Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Eurasian Economic Union, the Middle East, Western China, Mongolia and Europe (The Astana International Financial Center, AIFC 2018). In this regard, one of the most promising aspects of cooperation, which was actively promoted by Kazakhstan, was the idea to introduce a global crypto currency in order to stabilize world trade and advance a more sustainable, stable and just decentralized financial system in the world which would benefit not only the most developed nations but also emerging ones, many of which, as it turns out, are landlocked.

The two-year membership of Kazakhstan in the UN Security Council (2017–2018)

On 28 June 2016 Kazakhstan was elected to serve as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for a two-year term, from 1 January 2017 till 31 December 2018. Along with Japan, Kazakhstan currently represents the countries of the Asia-Pacific Group in the UN Organization. The image of the country as a neutral actor in the international arena was regarded as a key opportunity to represent Kazakhstan's peaceful strategy in this authoritative council (Putz 2016). Kazakhstan is committed to promoting more effective mutually beneficial multilateral diplomacy, especially in the advancement of conflict mediation and confidence-building among all members of this global organization. Kazakhstan wants to facilitate the diffusion of basic principles of trust, transparency and tolerance in international relations, demonstrate political leadership in mediating processes with a balanced view and political neutrality and apply the best practices and lessons learned from the successful domestic context in promoting interfaith, inter-ethnic and intercultural dialogue in the work of the Security Council (The Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the United States, ERKUS 2017). One of the integration projects that was proposed by Astana relates to the promotion of an ambitious initiative called G-Global, which is promoted within the framework of the UN as an alternative channel to unite humankind additional to existing forums of inter-governmental relations such as the G7 and G20 (G-Global Initiative 2018). In this organization, Kazakhstan is often at the forefront of proposing a political and economic agenda in the interest of countries that have no access to the sea.

Conclusion

This paper has shown through a combinative use of context, policy and discourse analysis that a symbiotic relationship arguably exists between the geographical location of a typical landlocked and transcontinental country and the development of its foreign policy. The article presents a case study of Kazakhstan's foreign policy initiatives aiming to promote regional security and development from the perspective of its unique geopolitical location and of regional challenges owing to the lack of mutually beneficial economic collaboration and integration between various nations in the Eurasian supercontinent. Trying to leverage the limitations of its landlocked location, Kazakhstan has resorted to a policy of diversification and a proactive stance in foreign relations, which as an exit strategy in diplomacy has encompassed not only a post-Soviet but also a pro-Asian and pro-European direction. In the process, this Central Asian country has managed to integrate itself into various international organizations and has become a proactive promoter of many regional economic and political integration processes. Its multi-vector approach and proactive stance in regional integration processes could be regarded as a success story of how a typical landlocked and transcontinental country can set its foreign policy agenda. Kazakhstan's advantageous transcontinental location in the heart of Eurasia is a key factor that enables this country to claim the status of a transportation hub between Europe and Asia. Its proactive stance in many regional processes and its reputation as a friendly nation and reliable

international partner in turn facilitated the election of Kazakhstan to the chair of the OSCE in 2010. By initiating several international forums that aimed to enhance cooperation and promoting security and stability in the region, Kazakhstan has managed to enhance its geopolitical role in the world as a mediator in many regional conflicts. These unique soft power initiatives combined have helped to dramatically promote a positive image of this relatively young independent country on an international scale.

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