

## FROM BALANCING TO ACTIVE HEDGING: THE TRANSFORMATION OF KAZAKHSTAN'S MULTI-VECTOR FOREIGN POLICY AFTER 2022

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### Abstract

The outbreak of the 2022 military crisis in Ukraine significantly redefined Kazakhstan's geopolitical setting, highlighting the limits of its established foreign policy model and steering it toward a proactive hedging approach emblematic of middle powers. Based on the concepts of equidistant diplomacy and hedging, the article illustrates how Astana simultaneously reduces exposure to any single power center and converts participation in the multilateral forums into economic and political gains. Six hedging tracks are examined: Russian, Chinese, European, American (the United States), Turkic, and Southern (Gulf states), as well as an autonomous transit track represented by the Middle or Trans-Caspian Corridor. Drawing on legislative texts, policy declarations, and development frameworks from 2022–2025, the analysis traces Kazakhstan's evolution from geographic balancing to rules-based portfolio management of interdependence in trade corridors, capital flows, and regulatory standards, highlighting the ongoing institutional entrenchment of Eurasian regionalism. Although Kazakhstan's bargaining leverage has expanded, its hedging behavior remains limited by the need to coordinate with the C5 group (the five Central Asian states), manage asymmetries with larger economies, and ensure conformity with the institutional norms of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEAU).

**Keywords:** Kazakhstan, new geopolitics, multi-vector foreign policy, hedging, middle power, Eurasian regionalism.

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## **Introduction**

Changing geopolitical realities have exposed several structural vulnerabilities in Kazakhstan. Sanctions have disrupted trade and finance, while dependence on critical infrastructure, such as the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC), has increased exposure to external pressures. At the same time, overlapping integration frameworks have produced new regulatory frictions.

In this context, Kazakhstan's foreign policy orientation was recalibrated toward strict adherence to international law, multilateralism, and the principle of sovereign equality. Astana also clarified its non-recognition of the breakaway entities in Donetsk and Luhansk, reaffirming its commitment to the UN Charter. In practice, this shift was reflected in an adjustment in the operational design of Kazakhstan's multi-vector policy, moving from equidistance to active hedging. Sanctions-induced volatility further heightened the demand for economic and legal compliance, compelling Astana to mitigate transit and compliance risks, restrict the re-export of sensitive goods, and preserve legitimate trade relations with major partners. This process required strengthening export-control mechanisms, digitalizing supply-chain traceability, and aligning domestic procedures with European and American practices while safeguarding obligations under the EAEU framework.

Second, infrastructure vulnerability became more pronounced, reflected in the concentration of flows along southern routes and dependence on bottlenecks in pipeline and port infrastructure. Disruptions at the CPC demonstrated how Kazakhstan's landlocked position can transform from a structural constraint into a strategic vulnerability during external shocks. In response, Astana pursued a rapid diversification of transport routes via the Middle or Trans-Caspian Corridor and the southern direction through the Gulf, transforming a set of individual projects into a unified transport system governed by standardized rules, digital mechanisms, and co-ordinated operations.

A third trend involved the growing competition among Eurasian institutional and normative regimes. The parallel expansion of the C5+China and C5+EU/US formats, the activation of the Turkic dimension through the OTS, and the maintenance of obligations within the EAEU and SCO have made regulatory compatibility and the avoidance of institutional conflict pressing priorities. In this context, traditional equidistance—based on maintaining equal relations with major powers—no longer provides sufficient protection from systemic risks or logistical disruptions. Consequently, Kazakhstan has shifted toward a practical, though undeclared, form of hedging that blends neutral discourse with diversification policies, spreading economic and logistical exposure across multiple centers and enhancing domestic regulatory resilience.

**Conceptual Framework and Methodology:** The article is based on the argument that hedging refines multi-vectorism into a more coherent strategic framework, shifting from situational balancing to the institutional and legal management of interdependence across multiple arenas. Its empirical base incorporates normative acts, official statements, multilateral roadmaps, and initiatives (C5+1, Global Gateway, OTS), complemented by sectoral cases in logistics, critical minerals, energy, and export control.

Central to this study is the operationalization of hedging as a form of procedural multi-vectorism. It includes three dimensions: first, institutionalism, reflected in the establishment of secretariats, business councils, and control regimes; second, proceduralization, encompassing digital documentation, tariff coordination, and interoperable standards; and third, network diversification, manifested in the development of combined routes and transport corridors. The practical relevance of this model lies in its capacity to show how Kazakhstan manages external shocks, increases bargaining power, and converts participation in regional formats into durable development gains.

The article is structured as follows. The first section offers a theoretical comparison of balancing, equidistance, and hedging in the context of middle-power behavior. The subsequent section provides a comparative examination of Kazakhstan's hedging strategies across several vectors: Russian, Chinese, Western (EU/US), Turkic, C5+1, Southern/Gulf, and transit. The conclusion discusses the strategic constraints (C5 coordination, asymmetries with larger economies, regime compatibility between the EAEU and C5+China) and argues that multi-vectorism is evolving into an institutionalized practice of interdependence management.

The theoretical basis of the study derives from the classical problem confronting small and middle powers: choosing between balancing and bandwagoning, concepts rooted in the distribution of power and perceived threats.<sup>1</sup> Under conditions of complex interdependence, ramified legal regimes, and dense economic connectedness, this binary model loses explanatory power.<sup>2</sup> A range of intermediary strategies therefore emerges, encompassing equidistance, non-alignment, strategic ambiguity, and most prominently, hedging.<sup>3</sup>

The contrast between equidistance and hedging is evident in their aims, instruments, and expected outcomes. Whereas equidistance seeks to minimize politi-

<sup>1</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Cornell University Press, 1987); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Addison-Wesley, 1979); Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 72–107.

<sup>2</sup> Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Power and Interdependence* (Little, Brown, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> Evelyn Goh, *Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies*, Policy Studies No. 16 (East-West Center, 2005).

cal involvement and preserve flexibility by maintaining equal proximity to competing centers of power.<sup>4</sup> hedging focuses on actively managing risk while also deriving benefits from multiple, often rival, ecosystems.<sup>5</sup>

In this context, the instruments of policy evolve from the rhetoric of neutrality and balanced diplomacy to more structured mechanisms: institutional participation in multilateral platforms, procedural institutionalization, regulatory controls over exports and compliance, financial diversification, and infrastructural redundancy through parallel routes and substitute nodes. The functional outcomes also diverge. Equidistance reduces reputational costs from openly choosing sides, but leaves the state exposed to shared risks (sanctions, constraints, logistical disruptions). Hedging, however, reduces the variance of adverse outcomes through a portfolio of options and pre-established insurance mechanisms.

As Kuik suggests, hedging constitutes a policy pursued without formal proclamation, in which outward neutrality coexists with the construction of an implicit framework of safeguards.<sup>6</sup> In Asian contexts, at least two main types can be distinguished. Insurance hedging focuses on building buffers against shocks through legal controls, alternative transport routes, infrastructure redundancy, and credit lines secured from diverse sources. Influencing hedging, by contrast, entails embedding a state within institutional and normative networks that amplify its weight through procedural leadership and norm-setting activities such as business councils, secretariats, joint roadmaps, and harmonized standards.

Middle powers are particularly predisposed to such practices. The literature on middle-power diplomacy highlights their niche strengths in mediation, coalition formation, norm entrepreneurship, and network-based influence.<sup>7</sup> With limited hard capabilities and high external exposure, institutions, rules, and infrastructure become multipliers of influence. In this context, hedging organically converts a declarative principle into an operational instrument of interdependence management.

Hedging tends to prevail over equidistance in contexts of pronounced systemic uncertainty characterized by volatility, sanctions, and fragmented regulatory environments. Its effectiveness further depends on asymmetric dependencies with key partners, economic openness that amplifies external vulnerabilities, and robust domestic institutions capable of sustaining sophisticated frameworks such as export-control and tariff coordination. Geography also plays a decisive role. Landlocked

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<sup>4</sup> Kei Koga, “Conceptualizing Equidistant Diplomacy in International Relations: The Case of Singapore,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 22, no. 3 (2022): 449–476.

<sup>5</sup> Cheng-Chwee Kuik, “Hedging in Post-Pandemic Asia: What, How, and Why?,” *The Asan Forum*, 2020, <https://theasanforum.org/hedging-in-post-pandemic-asia-what-how-and-why/>.

<sup>6</sup> Kuik, “Hedging in Post-Pandemic Asia.”

<sup>7</sup> Carsten Holbraad, *Middle Powers in International Politics* (Macmillan, 1984).

geographical position, in particular, amplifies the need for redundant and diversified infrastructure.

Building on this foundation, the typology of procedural multi-vectorism comprises five complementary mechanisms. The first involves institutionalization, achieved by expanding engagement in multilateral frameworks, establishing secretariats and business councils, and launching structured roadmaps for cooperation.<sup>8</sup> Second, proceduralization focuses on developing interoperable customs and tariff standards, digital trade documentation, and coordinated export-control mechanisms. Third, network diversification expands logistical and infrastructural linkages. Fourth, financial and technological diversification involves alternative capital channels, participation in regional funding mechanisms, Islamic finance tools, and collaboration within rival technological ecosystems, particularly in decarbonization and digital transformation. Finally, normative leadership emerges through the projection of regulatory models, encompassing nuclear safety, energy regulation, and environmental sustainability standards.

The empirical operationalization of hedging rests on a series of observable indicators signaling movement beyond equidistance. These include the diversification of interdependencies (changes in the trade, finance, and route indices; a higher share of alternative corridors in transit), institutional intensity (the number and depth of formats involving the country, the presence of secretariats and roadmaps); regulatory adjustment (timeliness and completeness of implementing export controls, digital tracking, and compliance frameworks); infrastructure redundancy (added capacity of alternatives and the emergence of substitute nodes), and normative outcomes, observable in the diffusion or external adoption of national standards.

Under conditions of complex interdependence and fragmented global rules, hedging offers a more effective strategy than equidistance. It substitutes declarative neutrality with institutional, regulatory, financial, and infrastructural safeguards that reduce risk exposure, diversify trade routes and capital sources, and expand influence through participation in normative and multilateral platforms. Its core is procedural multi-vectorism supplemented by institutionalization, network diversification, financial and technological diversification, and normative leadership. Hedging tends to emerge under conditions of systemic uncertainty, asymmetric dependencies, economic openness, adequate regulatory capacity, and the structural constraints of landlocked geography. Empirically, it manifests through dispersed patterns of interdependence, enhanced engagement in multilateral institutions, ac-

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<sup>8</sup> Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia*, 3rd ed. (Routledge, 2014).

celerated regulatory and compliance adaptation, expanded infrastructural redundancy, and the outward transmission of domestic norms and standards.

### **Kazakhstan's Hedging Policy**

Between 2022 and 2025, Kazakhstan's external environment became a stress test of resilience: sanctions and regulatory risks intensified, dependence on specific infrastructure nodes grew more apparent, and competition among normative regimes in Eurasia deepened. The response was not only to preserve multi-vectorism, but also to reconceptualize it in the logic of a middle power's hedging strategy—diversifying both vulnerabilities and sources of gain, and shifting emphasis from neutrality rhetoric to rules, institutions, and infrastructure that embed insurance mechanisms for managing interdependence.

Kazakhstan's foreign policy can be understood as a set of distinct tracks, each shaped by its own decision-making logic and institutional framework. To compare these tracks, three analytical elements are identified. Policy tools refer to concrete and observable actions such as passing legislation, establishing secretariats, launching digital cargo-tracking systems, or creating financial instruments. Payoffs capture the resulting benefits, including expanded markets, investment inflows, technological advancement, and more reliable supply chains with lower transaction costs. Anchor points denote the milestones that formalize progress, such as the adoption of legal acts, intergovernmental agreements, summit-endorsed roadmaps, or the commissioning of infrastructure projects. This approach helps maintain analytical clarity by focusing on three questions for each track: what was implemented, what outcomes it produced, and which concrete events confirm these results.

Viewed through the analytical lens of international relations, this study moves beyond descriptive narration by introducing a set of comparative indicators that help systematically evaluate Kazakhstan's foreign policy tracks. The first, initialization, refers to the establishment and continuity of institutional platforms—such as secretariats, business councils, and formalized monitoring procedures—that ensure regular assessment of agreements. The second, procedural compatibility, captures the extent to which national regulations, including digital documentation, customs and tariff coordination, and export-control mechanisms, are aligned with external standards. The third, infrastructural redundancy, examines whether transport routes possess sufficient flexibility and resilience through the development of alternative capacities and parallel nodes. Finally, the interdependence–diversification indicator traces the distribution of trade, capital, and logistical flows: a lower level of concentration across these domains signifies greater systemic resilience and a stronger bargaining position for the state.

## EAEU “Toxic Asset” vs. Platform for Hedging

Since 2022, Kazakhstan’s participation in the EAEU has drawn polarized assessments. One camp of authors sees the Union as a source of toxicity, a channel for sanctions-related and reputational ‘spillovers’, asymmetries, and regulatory conflicts. The other treats the EAEU as a tool for procedural hedging, a venue where the ‘rule repair’ (digital traceability, export control, barrier removal, adjustment of tariff formulas) can reduce vulnerability while preserving access to markets and cooperation. Viewed through this lens, Kazakhstan treats the EAEU less as a binary decision to remain or withdraw and more as an adjustable framework, in which outcomes hinge on the extent to which legal and digital safeguards are institutionalized and procedural compatibility with external regimes is maintained alongside diversified trade and capital flows.

Several experts argue that participation in the EAEU amplifies sanctions-related and reputational risks, while market asymmetry weakens Astana’s bargaining power. Independent political scientist Dosym Satpayev explicitly labels EAEU (and CSTO) as toxic institutions for Kazakhstan in the current environment and predicts a negative reaction from Moscow to any talk of withdrawal, making the situation, in his view, a dilemma.<sup>9</sup> Economist Almas Chukin argues that Kazakhstan should leave the EAEU due to the loss of trade sovereignty, non-tariff barriers, and higher consumer prices, using a “more independent foreign-trade policy.”<sup>10</sup>

Several Kazakhstani experts advocate not abandoning integration within the EAEU but recalibrating its parameters. Political scientist Andrey Chebotarev argues it is more rational to focus on removing non-tariff barriers, harmonizing procedures, and fine-tuning tariff and customs mechanisms than debating an exit. The emphasis, in his view, should fall on gradual regulatory adjustment achieved through negotiation and institutional dialogue. Similarly, economist Rasul Rysmambetov calls for revising the terms of cooperation and using the EAEU’s institu-

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<sup>9</sup> Dosym Satpayev, “Kazakhstan’s withdrawal from the EAEU and the CSTO is a hostile step for Russia,” *Azattyq Rýhy*, 2022, <https://rus.azattyq-ruhy.kz/society/37529-dosym-satpaev-vykhod-kazakhstana-%D0%82z-eaes-i-odkb-dlia-rossii-vrazhdebnyi-shag>, in Russian: [Досым Сатпаев, “Выход Казахстана из ЕАЭС и ОДКБ для России — враждебный шаг,” *Azattyq Rýhy*, 2022, <https://rus.azattyq-ruhy.kz/society/37529-dosym-satpaev-vykhod-kazakhstana-%D0%82z-eaes-i-odkb-dlia-rossii-vrazhdebnyi-shag>].

<sup>10</sup> ZONAkz, “Why Kazakhstan must leave the EAEU — Why Kazakhstan should not leave the EAEU,” April 11, 2022, <https://zonakz.net/2022/04/11/pochemu-kazaxstanu-neobxodimo-vyjiti-iz-eaes-pochemu-kazaxstanu-ne-vyjiti-iz-eaes/>, in Russian: [ZONAkz, «Почему Казахстану необходимо выйти из ЕАЭС» — «Почему Казахстану не выйти из ЕАЭС», 11 апреля 2022, <https://zonakz.net/2022/04/11/pochemu-kazaxstanu-neobxodimo-vyjiti-iz-eaes-pochemu-kazaxstanu-ne-vyjiti-iz-eaes/>].

tional framework to advance Kazakhstan's national interests, underscoring the enduring importance of regional trade and investment.<sup>11</sup>

The official stance mirrors this cautious pragmatism. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has repeatedly rejected speculation about Kazakhstan's departure from the EAEU, reaffirming his government's commitment to existing integration frameworks and treaty obligations. In June 2022, he publicly clarified that rumors of an intended withdrawal were unfounded.<sup>12</sup>

A calibrated approach to expanding the supranational powers of the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) is emphasized separately. President Tokayev had earlier urged a careful stance toward delegating such functions. This line, favoring evolutionary integration and a measured institutional architecture, has been further developed in official discourse.<sup>13</sup> In essence, Kazakhstan's position seeks balance: staying within the Union while improving its mechanisms and ensuring that integration delivers measurable economic benefits. This orientation forms part of a broader strategy of procedural hedging, designed to strengthen flexibility without undermining commitments.

The CSTO military mission in Kazakhstan in January 2022 marked a significant precedent in the post-Soviet space. Acting at the request of President Tokayev, the organization deployed "collective peacekeeping forces" for the first time under Article 4 of the Treaty. The contingent arrived on January 6–7 and was fully withdrawn by January 19, establishing the practice of a time-limited operation.<sup>14</sup> In the immediate sense, the mission played a stabilizing role. Rapid restoration of control over key infrastructure and the reduction of violence helped prevent further escalation. However, as noted by Armenian expert of post-Soviet space Zhak Manukyan, "On February 16, 2022, the CSTO peacekeeping operation in Kazakhstan became a subject of discussion at a UN Security Council meeting on the topic of cooperation

<sup>11</sup> Qmonitor.kz, "Divorce and Maiden Name: What Will Happen if Kazakhstan Leaves the EAEU and the CSTO," 2022, <https://qmonitor.kz/politics/4023>, in Russian: [Qmonitor.kz, "Развод и девичья фамилия: что будет, если Казахстан выйдет из ЕАЭС и ОДКБ," 2022, <https://qmonitor.kz/politics/4023>].

<sup>12</sup> Inbusiness.kz, "Tokayev: Claims that Kazakhstan has cooled and wants to leave the EAEU and the CSTO are not true," 2022, <https://inbusiness.kz/ru/last/tokaev-razgovory-o-tom-cto-kazakhstan-ohladel-i-hochet-vyjti-iz-eaes-i-odkb-ne-sootvetstvuyut-dejstvitelnosti>, in Russian: [Inbusiness.kz, "Токаев: Разговоры о том, что Казахстан охладел и хочет выйти из ЕАЭС и ОДКБ, не соответствуют действительности," 2022, <https://inbusiness.kz/ru/last/tokaev-razgovory-o-tom-cto-kazakhstan-ohladel-i-hochet-vyjti-iz-eaes-i-odkb-ne-sootvetstvuyut-dejstvitelnosti>].

<sup>13</sup> RIA Novosti, "Tokayev urged a very cautious approach to expanding the powers of the EEC (Eurasian Economic Commission)," 2020, <https://ria.ru/amp/20200519/1571668636.html>, in Russian: [РИА Новости, "Токаев призвал очень осторожно подходить к расширению полномочий ЕЭК," 2020, <https://ria.ru/amp/20200519/1571668636.html>].

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Putz, "CSTO Deploys to Kazakhstan at Tokayev's Request," *The Diplomat*, January 6, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/csto-deploys-to-kazakhstan-at-tokayevs-request>.

between the UN and the CSTO”.<sup>15</sup> At the regional level, the mission demonstrated the CSTO’s ability to respond quickly to crises, enhancing its political relevance after earlier inaction in 2010 and 2021.

For Kazakhstan, participation in the CSTO remains pragmatic and limited in scope. The organization is seen primarily as a tool for crisis response and military coordination rather than as an instrument for involvement in external conflicts. The invocation of Article 4 to address internal unrest provoked legal debate and criticism from international organizations and the European Parliament, which pointed to a deterioration in the human rights situation.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, concerns about growing dependence on Russia surfaced in statements from Western officials, including US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.<sup>17</sup>

The international reaction was mixed. The EU focused on human rights and de-escalation, adopting a resolution on January 20, 2022.<sup>18</sup> The US emphasized Kazakhstan’s sovereignty and strengthened cooperation within the C5+1 format.<sup>19</sup> China expressed full support for the Kazakh leadership and deepened cooperation in security and infrastructure.<sup>20</sup>

The CSTO mission pushed Kazakhstan toward greater flexibility in its foreign policy. In the short term, this was reflected in the diversification of partners and routes (C5+1, OTS, Trans-Caspian Corridor). In the longer term, the country began to rely more on rules and institutions to manage external relations. The mission helped stabilize the situation and ended quickly, but it raised legal and reputational questions, accelerating Kazakhstan’s shift toward a hedging strategy and strengthening its independent foreign policy toolkit.

## Comparative Review of Policy Tracks from 2022 to 2025

**The Russian Track:** Since 2022, Kazakhstan has adjusted its approach to the northern track as shared vulnerabilities became increasingly evident. Sanctions im-

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<sup>15</sup> Zhak Manukyan, “The Strategic Role of Central Asia in a Changing World Order: Resources, Logistics, and Competition,” *YSU Journal of International Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2025): 66–99, <https://doi.org/10.46991/jia.2025.1.1.066>.

<sup>16</sup> European Parliament, “European Parliament Resolution of 20 January 2022 on the Situation in Kazakhstan (2022/2513(RSP)),” [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0013\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0013_EN.html).

<sup>17</sup> Doina Chiacu and Katharine Jackson, “U.S. Seeks Answers from Kazakhstan on Need for Russian-Led Troops,” *Reuters*, January 9, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-seeks-answers-kazakhstan-need-russian-led-troops-2022-01-09>.

<sup>18</sup> European Parliament, “European Parliament Resolution.”

<sup>19</sup> Chiacu and Jackson, “U.S. Seeks Answers.”

<sup>20</sup> Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the U.S., “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson’s Remarks on Kazakhstan,” January 7, 2022, [http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/fyrth/202201/t20220107\\_10601933.htm](http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/fyrth/202201/t20220107_10601933.htm).

posed on neighboring states and related disruptions quickly affected the country's supply chains, financial transactions, and international reputation, while interruptions at critical bottlenecks such as the Caspian Pipeline Consortium severely impacted revenue flows.<sup>21</sup> Astana's response was pragmatic: rather than curtailing trade, it focused on regulating sensitive sectors and increasing transparency within the system.

The adoption of the "Law on the Control of Specific Goods" marked a turning point in Kazakhstan's trade and export regulation. Under this law, any product with potential military or dual-use applications cannot be resold or exported without a license. End users and intended purposes must be verified in advance, and explicit rules are established to prevent unauthorized re-exports.<sup>22</sup> Implementing laws with procedures and control lists followed.

Through the Qoldau 360 digital module, authorities can now track shipments from import to re-export, allowing them to identify irregular routes or opaque recipients and, if necessary, halt transactions in real time. In parallel, line ministries introduced targeted restrictions on the export of military and dual-use goods to curb illicit or gray-market schemes.

A related concern arises within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Kazakhstan has raised the issue of revising the distribution formula for the common import duty to ensure a fairer arrangement that reflects the country's growing transit and trade burden.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, businesses and banks have been encouraged to strengthen compliance systems, incorporate end-use and end-user clauses in contracts, and enhance transparency in financial settlements.

As a result, sensitive goods are now subject to strict regulatory oversight and digital tracking, while ordinary trade continues to operate without interruption. This framework reduces the risk of secondary sanctions and reputational damage without undermining cooperation within the EAEU or restricting trade to a narrow set of routes.

Consequently, Kazakhstan's approach along the Russian track has evolved from a position of neutral non-interference to one of cautious hedging. Legal in-

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<sup>21</sup> Olzhas Auyezov, "Shocked by Ukraine War, Russian Neighbor Kazakhstan Looks West," *Reuters*, November 17, 2022,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/shocked-by-ukraine-war-russian-neighbour-kazakhstan-looks-west-2022-11-17/>.

<sup>22</sup> Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *On Control of Specific Goods*, No. 172-VII ZRK (December 28, 2022), Adilet (Legal Information System), unofficial translation, <https://adilet.zan.kz/eng/docs/Z2200000172/history>.

<sup>23</sup> Bekzada Ishekenova, "Kazakhstan is working on revising EAEU customs duties," *LS (LSM.kz)*, January 16, 2025, <https://lsm.kz/kazakhstan-poshliny-eaes-podrobnosti>, in Russian: [Бекзада Ишекенова, "Казахстан работает над пересмотром таможенных пошлин ЕАЭС," *LS (LSM.kz)*, 16 января 2025, <https://lsm.kz/kazakhstan-poshliny-eaes-podrobnosti>].

struments, including the statute, its implementing by-laws, and Kazakhstan's position within the EAEU, together with digital monitoring tools such as Qoldau 360, have enabled the country to mitigate exposure to secondary sanctions and reputational losses while preserving legitimate trade and cooperative relations within the union and avoiding vulnerability to external disruptions.

**The China Track:** Kazakhstan's China track is an illustrative example of insuring risks through institutions, procedures, and infrastructure, without declared "camp-switching". First, shifting from a bilateral plane to the C5+China format reduces asymmetry. China engages with the region not through bilateral channels but in coordination with its neighbors, working through a secretariat, a business council, and a regular schedule of summits. This strengthens bargaining power and establishes de-escalation channels in moments of friction—an essential feature of influence hedging.

Second, proceduralization through measures such as visa-free travel, synchronized border crossings, aligned timetables, and coordinated cargo priorities reduces transaction costs and makes supply chains more predictable. Such integrated rules function as an insurance mechanism against bureaucratic delays and bottlenecks, representing a form of process-level hedging.

Third, infrastructural redundancy is being built: freight flows are split across multiple crossings and lines, capacity is reserved in advance, and throughput is expanded on a planned basis. The effects are already visible along the China-oriented transport corridor. In 2024, total rail freight between Kazakhstan and China amounted to 32.05 million tonnes: 18.27 million moved via Dostyk–Alashankou and 13.79 million via Altynkol–Khorgos. Container traffic rose by 19.7 percent, easing congestion and ensuring a more balanced distribution of freight flows.<sup>24</sup> In parallel, Kazakhstan Temir Zholy and China Railway Urumqi Group aligned capacity plans and cargo-priority schedules for 2025, formalizing the practice of rapidly rebalancing timetables between crossings when one node is overloaded. An additional "insurance layer" comes from the construction of the third interconnection line, Ayagoz–Bakhty–Chuguchak (Tacheng), about 272 km long and slated for commissioning by 2027, a new border crossing, and another channel to offload existing routes.<sup>25</sup> Such redundancy reduces asymmetric interdependence and the risk of hold-up by any single node or partner, lowers switching between corridors,

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<sup>24</sup> TransportCorridors.com, "Kazakhstan and China Have Agreed on Plans for Rail Transport for 2025," February 5, 2025, <https://www.transportcorridors.com/10599>.

<sup>25</sup> Railjournal.com, "Kazakhstan Starts Building Third China Link: New Line Will Help Boost Freight Capacity by Two-Thirds by 2027," accessed November 12, 2025, <https://www.railjournal.com/freight/kazakhstan-starts-building-third-china-link>.

and thereby strengthens bargaining positions on tariffs, cargo priorities, and regulatory regimes.

In geo-economic terms, this functions as deterrence by denial: a local disruption does not cascade into systematic shock because cargo can be swiftly rerouted along alternative legs, and threats to “close a route” become less credible. In short, spatial networking of infrastructure operates as an insurance mechanism with the hedging strategy: it narrows the variance of adverse outcomes without any political need to change camps.<sup>26</sup>

Additional examples of procedural insurance include: Kazakhstan-China visa-free regime (30/90 days), which enables rapid team travel, critical for clearing bottlenecks and border crossing, and for servicing logistics operations.<sup>27</sup> During the second session of the Central Asia–China Business Council (Astana, June 2025), over thirty-five agreements valued at \$17 billion were concluded in logistics, renewable energy, and industrial cooperation, reflecting a portfolio strategy that balances risks across multiple sectors and time horizons.<sup>28</sup>

Consequently, Kazakhstan’s reserve infrastructure capacity, coupled with its increasingly coherent procedural and institutional framework, enables a form of managed interdependence with China. Rising freight volumes are accompanied by greater operational flexibility, reduced reliance on individual transit nodes, and a diminished likelihood of bottlenecks being leveraged as tools of political or economic pressure.

Kazakhstan’s soft-power strategy toward China is marked by a practical, businesslike orientation. Through visa-free travel, student and professional exchanges, joint festivals, and co-produced films and media projects, Astana promotes its national stories on Asian platforms and highlights its infrastructure corridors through cultural programming. The concrete outcome is a smoother process of partnership

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<sup>26</sup> Rail-News.kz, “Prospects for infrastructure development and freight transport discussed by the heads of KTZ and the Urumqi Railway,” 2024, <https://rail-news.kz/ru/news/18872-perspektivy-razvitiia-infrastruktury-i-gruzoperevozok-obsudili-rukovoditeli-ktz-i-urumciiskoi-zeleznoi-dorogi>, in Russian: [Rail-News.kz, “Перспективы развития инфраструктуры и грузоперевозок обсудили руководители КТЖ и Урумчийской железной дороги,” 2024, <https://rail-news.kz/ru/news/18872-perspektivy-razvitiia-infrastruktury-i-gruzoperevozok-obsudili-rukovoditeli-ktz-i-urumciiskoi-zeleznoi-dorogi>].

<sup>27</sup> RFE/RL, “China’s Xi Arrives in Kazakhstan for State Visit, SCO Summit,” July 2, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-xi-visit-kazakhstan-tajikistan-shanghai-cooperation-sco-summit/33018280.html>.

<sup>28</sup> The Astana Times, “Central Asia, China to Sign \$17 Billion in Deals at Astana Business Council,” 2025, <https://astanatimes.com/2025/06/central-asia-china-to-sign-17-billion-in-deals-at-astana-business-council/>.

formation, the growth of service chains linked to transit routes, and greater visibility of Kazakhstan as both a destination and an investment hub.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, this approach has vulnerabilities. As access to media and funding remains asymmetrical, the risk increases that Chinese narratives will dominate and erode Kazakhstan's own agenda. Cultural centers and academic programs are easily politicized. This can lead to self-censorship regarding sensitive issues. At home, this may trigger negative reactions and heighten public anxieties about migration. A structural imbalance may arise when the inflow of Chinese content exceeds the visibility of Kazakhstani initiatives on Chinese media platforms. This situation is compounded by reliance on external funding sources with their own policy priorities, reputational vulnerabilities linked to global discussions of human rights and technology, gaps in regulation concerning intellectual property and data, and the overlapping influence of Turkic, European, and Western identity models.<sup>30</sup>

To ensure that hedging on the Chinese track yields more benefits than risks, soft power cooperation should be grounded in simple, verifiable rules that spread risks and preserve agenda autonomy.

We contend that such projects should be co-financed on a parity basis (Kazakhstan + Chinese side) and selection should be open and competitive. This reduces dependence on a single funding source and limits the leverage of either party. It is classic hedging logic. In practice, it means that open calls with the pre-published criteria and timelines, equal access to funding for both inbound initiatives (visiting groups, content from China) and outbound initiatives (Kazakh tours, co-production, exhibitions in China), public reporting on each project's budget, objectives, and outcomes, and joint oversight through a bilateral or multilateral supervisory board.<sup>31</sup>

As a normative reference point, it is useful to cite the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, which encourages balanced exchanges and transparent public policies. Incorporating these principles into cultural and educational agreements makes the China track manageable: it diversifies funding sources, codifies reciprocity, and lowers regula-

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<sup>29</sup> RFE/RL, "China's Xi Arrives."

<sup>30</sup> National Endowment for Democracy (NED), *The Big Question: Understanding China's Sharp Power* (2017), <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Understanding-Chinas-Sharp-Power.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> Yusuf Çelik and Janaka Jayawickrama, "A Win-Win Relationship between China and Kazakhstan: Thinking Beyond Dependency," *Uluslararası Ekonomi, İşletme ve Politika Dergisi* 8, no. 2 (2024): 421–441, <https://doi.org/10.29216/ueip.1518040>.

tory and reputational risks—serving as an insurance mechanism with the hedging strategy.<sup>32</sup>

**The European Track:** The EU track is likewise being reconfigured in the hedging logic of Kazakhstan's foreign policy. This shift represents a move away from the traditional export-based raw materials model toward deeper integration into European industrial and green transition chains. Critical minerals are increasingly seen not as a static extractive resource but as a foundation for beneficiation, processing, and battery-material production, linked to access to decarbonization technologies and standardized regulatory frameworks. The EU–Kazakhstan Memorandum on Critical Raw Materials, Batteries, and Renewable Hydrogen (7 November 2022), together with the 2023–2024 Roadmap, outlines specific steps—from resource mapping and ESG compliance to financial coordination and industrial cooperation. By 2025, the partnership had evolved from general commitments to the implementation of tangible projects.<sup>33</sup>

The reasons for this shift are typical of the hedging strategy. First, diversification of routes through the Trans-Caspian Corridor mitigates risks and lessens reliance on a single direction, reducing vulnerability to supply-chain interruptions and the reputational fallout of sanctions.<sup>34</sup> Second, it escapes the “raw-material corner”: moving from ore exports to long-cycle intermediates and components dampens price volatility, anchors relations in long-term contracts, and increases added value. Third, standards function as insurance: joint alignment on ESG, traceability, and EU technical regulations reduces regulatory uncertainty (including carbon requirements) and eases market access. Fourth, technology and capital provide a safeguard against technological lag: EU instruments, ranging from Global Gateway to EBRD/EIB financing and industry consortia, lower the cost of modernization and bring in green solutions.

These processes are unfolding within a broader geo-economic context, where European initiatives coexist and interact with other major infrastructure projects, most notably China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

An important element of Kazakhstan's European track is the competitive yet complementary dynamic between the BRI and the European Union's Global Gate-

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<sup>32</sup> UNESCO, *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*, Legal Affairs, accessed November 12, 2025, <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-protection-and-promotion-diversity-cultural-expressions>.

<sup>33</sup> European Commission, “COP27: European Union Concludes a Strategic Partnership with Kazakhstan on Raw Materials, Batteries and Renewable Hydrogen,” press release, November 6, 2022, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_22\\_6585](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_6585).

<sup>34</sup> European Commission, “Global Gateway: €10 Billion Commitment to Invest in Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor Connecting Europe and Central Asia Announced at Investors Forum,” press release, January 29, 2024, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_24\\_501](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_501).

way initiative. Both programs cover similar areas, infrastructure development, transport corridors, digitalization, energy, and green technologies, but they are based on different political-institutional principles, standards, and financing mechanisms. Kazakhstan does not position these initiatives in opposition to one another but instead pursues a strategy of parallel participation, which is a typical manifestation of hedging logic.<sup>35</sup>

By using the tools of both BRI and Global Gateway, Astana diversifies sources of investment and technology, reduces dependence on any single external center, and strengthens its bargaining position. European standards and regulatory mechanisms serve as a “safety layer”, offsetting potential risks of excessive dependence on China’s infrastructure and financial model. At the same time, participation in the BRI remains economically significant and is complemented by Kazakhstan’s integration into European value chains and regulatory frameworks.

This configuration allows Kazakhstan to compare cooperation terms, manage regulatory risks, and ensure sustainable infrastructure development, reflecting a strategy of procedural hedging rather than a binary choice between competing geopolitical blocs.

Finally, within the C5+EU framework and through the Samarkand Summit, a political-institutional layer has emerged that enables agreement on shared corridor standards, digital documentation, harmonized customs systems, and coordinated timetables—effectively converting the route from fragmented initiatives into an integrated, managed chain.<sup>36</sup>

Kazakhstan’s hedging strategy in the sphere of soft power is reflected in how Astana diversifies risks and builds autonomy by engaging with European Union cultural and educational platforms without binding itself to any single partner. Regular EU public events in the country, such as the European Film Festival and Europe Days, create alternative venues for broad audience engagement, thereby reducing dependence on individual media markets and cultural centers.<sup>37</sup> Serving as institutional anchors, the EU’s cultural platforms facilitate co-productions and co-financed initiatives built upon shared standards—a clear instance of rule-based

<sup>35</sup> Aida Yerimpasheva and Hans-Christian Brauweiler, *Global Gateway as a Tool for Sustainable Growth of Kazakhstan*, Ordnungspolitische Diskurse, no. 2025-2 (2025), <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/320422/1/1929669313.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> European Commission — Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), “Global Gateway: EU and Central Asian Countries Agree on Building Blocks to Develop the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor,” January 30, 2024, [https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/global-gateway-eu-and-central-asian-countries-agree-building-blocks-develop-trans-caspian-transport-2024-01-30\\_en](https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/global-gateway-eu-and-central-asian-countries-agree-building-blocks-develop-trans-caspian-transport-2024-01-30_en).

<sup>37</sup> EEAS — Delegation of the European Union to Kazakhstan, “We Celebrated Europe Day Right in the Heart of Astana!” 2025, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kazakhstan/we-celebrated-europe-day-right-heart-astana>.

hedging. At the normative and educational level, Kazakhstan's involvement in Erasmus+ programs and the European Higher Education Area (via the Bologna Process) has fostered convergence of curricula, quality control systems, and academic frameworks with European models. This helps lower regulatory and reputational risks and widen access to grants and partners.<sup>38</sup> The C5+EU multilateral platform, consolidated at the Samarkand Summit in April 2025, established a political-institutional layer that integrates cultural, educational, and connectivity initiatives through unified rules, digitalized processes, and coordinated governance. In this way, soft power becomes institutionalized and strategically managed. Viewed comprehensively, this configuration embodies hedging: Kazakhstan broadens its engagement with European cultural and academic networks, formalizes collaboration through co-financing and open selection procedures, and spreads exposure across diverse platforms, including public diplomacy and higher education.<sup>39</sup>

**The American Track:** Kazakhstan's this hedging track is structured around the C5+US framework, a platform that brings together the five Central Asian states and the United States. Following the leaders' summit in New York in September 2023, the parties affirmed a common course on security, economy, energy, and connectivity. The New York Declaration specifically underscores the importance of clean energy and the integration of power systems. To translate framework arrangements into projects, the US launched several bridging instruments. First, the B5+1 (Business Five Plus One) platform functions as the business counterpart to the C5+1 framework. Its inaugural forum, held on 13–15 March 2024 in Almaty, identified five priority sectors for investment and cooperation: transport and logistics, e-commerce, tourism, agribusiness, and renewable energy. The platform thus serves as a practical entry point for access to U.S. capital, compliance standards, and expert networks.

Second, the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) establishes the U.S.–Central Asia Council on Trade and Investment. Its fifteenth meeting, convened in Astana on 14 June 2024, focused on eliminating barriers, streamlining procedures, and advancing digital trade and services for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). For Kazakhstan, this represents a roadmap for the gradual refinement of trade rules (CIPE, “B5+1 Takes New Steps to Accelerate Central Asia’s Economic Integration,” 2023).

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<sup>38</sup> ENIC-Kazakhstan, “Key Documents — Bologna Process,” accessed November 12, 2025, [https://enic-kazakhstan.edu.kz/ru/bologna\\_process/documents](https://enic-kazakhstan.edu.kz/ru/bologna_process/documents), in Russian: [ENIC-Kazakhstan, “Основные документы — Болонский процесс,” accessed November 12, 2025, [https://enic-kazakhstan.edu.kz/ru/bologna\\_process/documents](https://enic-kazakhstan.edu.kz/ru/bologna_process/documents)].

<sup>39</sup> Council of the European Union, “First EU–Central Asia Summit, 4 April 2025,” Meeting page, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2025/04/04/>.

Third, in the energy domain, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has since 2018 implemented the Central Asian Regional Electricity Market (CAREM) initiative, aimed at developing a regional electricity market. The program assists regulators and companies in preparing for renewable energy transactions, green power trading, and the harmonization of energy rules at the regional level. For Kazakhstan, this simultaneously reduces the costs of integrating renewables and improves the projects' ability to secure financing.<sup>40</sup>

Fourth, the Economic Resilience Initiative in Central Asia (ERICEN), launched in 2022, has reached a funding level of approximately \$50 million during 2022–2023. The program focuses on soft infrastructure, including alternative transport routes such as the Trans-Caspian corridor, electronic payments, trade facilitation, skill development, and English-language training for civil servants and entrepreneurs. These constitute the practical foundations upon which diversification is built.<sup>41</sup>

Fifth, the C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue (CMD), which convened its first meeting on 8 February 2024 at the U.S. Department of State, is designed to link Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states to global value chains in uranium, rare earth, and non-ferrous metals. Its agenda emphasizes attracting investment and fostering shared standards for sustainable and transparent extraction and processing.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, under the domain of logistics, both physical and procedural, the U.S. Department of Commerce's Commercial Law Development Program (CLDP) oversees the Trans-Caspian Trade Route (TCTR/Middle Corridor) project. The initiative prioritizes soft infrastructure, emphasizing harmonized port and border procedures, digitalized documentation, and coordination mechanisms that facilitate cargo movement without multi-billion-dollar construction investments (CLDP, "Trans-Caspian Trade Route (TCTR)").

The American track provides Kazakhstan with structured access to U.S. investment, markets, and regulatory expertise through platforms such as B5+1 and TIFA. The Almaty Forum of 2024 identified five priority sectors—transport and logistics, e-commerce, tourism, agribusiness, and renewable energy—while the TIFA meeting in Astana the same year emphasized the removal of trade barriers

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<sup>40</sup> USAID Power Central Asia Activity, *Public Annual Report 2023* (January 2024), [https://powercentralasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/PCA-Public-Annual-Report-2023\\_v2\\_comp.pdf](https://powercentralasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/PCA-Public-Annual-Report-2023_v2_comp.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Economic Resilience in Central Asia Initiative," accessed November 12, 2025, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/economic-resilience-in-central-asia-initiative>.

<sup>42</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Inaugural C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue among the United States and Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan," 2024, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/inaugural-c51-critical-minerals-dialogue-among-the-united-states-and-kazakhstan-the-kyrgyz-republic-tajikistan-turkmenistan-and-uzbekistan/>.

and the development of digital commerce for small and medium-sized enterprises. In the energy field, CAREM and USAID's Power Central Asia initiatives are helping to shape a regional electricity market and shared rules for renewable integration, improving returns and system stability. ERICEN develops soft infrastructure by promoting alternative routes, electronic payments, and trade facilitation, while the Critical Minerals Dialogue (CMD) connects Kazakhstan to global value chains in uranium and non-ferrous metals. Through the Commercial Law Development Program (CLDP) under the Trans-Caspian Trade Route (TCTR) initiative, procedural reforms are being introduced in logistics; with sustained policy backing, the Middle Corridor could triple freight volumes and shorten transit times by 2030.

Visible progress underlines these trends. In Almaty, a roadmap across five sectors and a permanent business–government dialogue format has been established. In Astana, steps have been taken to remove trade barriers and advance digital trade. In the energy sector, regulators now cooperate through dedicated working groups, while pilot projects in renewables are underway. In logistics, a “soft connectivity” plan is being rolled out along the Trans-Caspian route. The broader logic is clear: the American track does not replace Kazakhstan's other directions but complements them, adding a layer of clear rules, market access, expertise, and institutionalized soft infrastructure.

**The Turkic Track:** As a practical form of hedging Kazakhstan's Turkic track reduces its reliance on a single route or source of financing, builds a buffer of resilience through connectivity across the South Caucasus and Türkiye, and integrates into the broader Turkish engineering and financial ecosystem. Within the agenda of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), transport remains a central priority, with the Middle, or Trans-Caspian, Corridor forming its backbone. The Samarkand Declaration of 2022 outlined a course for deeper regional connectivity, while at the 2024 ministerial meeting in Shusha, transport ministers agreed on the legal framework for permits, a unified system of electronic permits for international road haulage. The reform significantly cuts paperwork, accelerates border crossings, and reduces transport costs for carriers, providing a tangible example of how procedural harmonization can translate into economic efficiency.<sup>43</sup>

The second element is the quick-disbursing financing and co-investment. The Turkic Investment Fund (TIF) was established with an initial capital of \$500 million; the founding treaty entered into force in 2024. By 2025, the fund had started introducing a set of operational mechanisms designed to support SMEs, infrastruc-

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<sup>43</sup> Turkic States Organization, “Samarkand Declaration of the Ninth Summit of the Organization of Turkic States,” accessed November 13, 2025, <https://www.turkicstates.org/u/d/basic-documents/ninth-summit-declarataion-16-en>.

ture development, and industrial ventures along the corridor. For Kazakhstan, it provides both diversification from conventional lenders and a complementary avenue for shared project financing.<sup>44</sup>

The third pillar is the corridor's infrastructure backbone. In May 2024, the freight section of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars line completed modernization: its stated capacity rose to 5 million tons per year, and the line reopened for freight traffic. For Kazakhstan, the route forms a vital component of the Caspian–South Caucasus–Türkiye transport chain. It mitigates reliance on the northern corridor, diversifies transit exposure, and broadens export opportunities. This diversification, in turn, reinforces the hedging effect by ensuring access to a high-capacity route governed by more transparent and reliable procedures.<sup>45</sup>

In the soft-power dimension, the Turkic track functions as a pragmatic expression of Kazakhstan's hedging strategy. By expanding cultural cooperation with Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and other partners, Astana diversifies its symbolic resources and reduces reliance on a single cultural hub. This is not a substitute for the European or American directions but a complementary layer grounded in festivals, academic exchanges, media collaboration, and tourism. The result is greater international visibility and additional channels of influence. The OTS acts as the coordinating mechanism, harmonizing cultural programs, initiating educational projects, and advancing shared standards for accreditation and mobility, while TURKSOY, the International Turkic Academy, and TURKPA implement these through joint cultural and academic activities.<sup>46</sup>

Kazakhstan's Turkic track serves as a practical hedge, broadening routes and financing sources through partnerships with the South Caucasus and Türkiye while tapping Turkish expertise in engineering and finance. Under the OTS, transport integration has been prioritized, with the Middle (Trans-Caspian) Corridor as its core. The Samarkand Declaration (2022) and the ePermit accord (2024) simplified procedures and expedited transit. The Turkic Investment Fund offers rapid co-financing for SMEs and infrastructure, while the renewed Baku–Tbilisi–Kars line enhances capacity and disperses risks. Through TURKSOY, the International Turkic Academy, and TURKPA, Kazakhstan's soft power expands across culture, academia, and media. The Turkic direction thus reinforces, rather than replaces, Western partnerships by embedding a resilient framework of connectivity and shared norms.

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<sup>44</sup> Turkic Investment Fund, "At a Glance," 2025, <https://turkicfund.org/about-us/>.

<sup>45</sup> Nikos Papatolios, "Baku–Tbilisi–Kars Railway Is Officially Open Again after Year-Long Closure," *RailFreight.com*, May 23, 2024, <https://www.railfreight.com/infrastructure/2024/05/23/baku-tbilisi-kars-railway-is-officially-open-again-after-year-long-closure/>.

<sup>46</sup> Turkic Academy, accessed November 13, 2025, <https://turkicacademy.org/en>.

The transit track warrants particular attention as an end-to-end transport corridor connecting Kazakhstan with the Caspian, Baku, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars line, Turkish ports, and the EU. This strategy emphasizes an integrated routing approach designed to hedge against the vulnerabilities of the northern corridor and bureaucratic delays. The implementation of digital documentation, harmonized procedural standards consistent with the European framework, capacity expansion at the Port of Baku, and the modernization of the BTK railway have made the corridor functionally coherent in terms of regulation and scheduling. As a result, Kazakhstan gains enhanced bargaining leverage, lower transaction costs, and greater predictability in its logistics chain.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

Across all of Kazakhstan's foreign policy vectors runs a consistent logic: rules and procedures can stabilize interdependence as effectively as physical connectivity. When electronic documentation is standardized, tariffs and schedules coordinated, and digital booking and export-control systems made transparent, the institutional architectures of different integration spaces become easier to reconcile. This creates a structure of dual compatibility—linking Kazakhstan both to the EAEU and C5+China initiatives, and to the C5+EU, C5+US, and OTS frameworks.

From a portfolio logic perspective, this approach produces three outcomes. First, it creates redundancy across routes and sources of capital. Second, it helps prevent ripple effects of disruption between distinct strategic directions. Third, it strengthens Astana's role as a process organizer and rule architect.

Importantly, this strategy also serves as a tool for managing the regional balance of power. Through hedging, Kazakhstan seeks to maintain equilibrium among major external actors, balancing between cooperative frameworks and competing strategic agendas. While some partners — notably the EU and the United States — emphasize rules-based cooperation and connectivity, others, such as Russia and China, often pursue more dominant or hierarchical roles in the region. In this context, hedging allows Kazakhstan to avoid structural dependence on any single power center, mitigate the effects of hegemonic ambitions, and preserve room for foreign policy maneuver.

Ultimately, hedging transforms Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy from a set of parallel ties into a coherent, networked system for managing interdependencies, in which each new institutional interface enhances resilience and expands the space for development.

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<sup>47</sup> World Bank, *The Middle Trade and Transport Corridor: Policies and Investments to Triple Freight Volumes and Halve Travel Time by 2030* (2023), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/middle-trade-and-transport-corridor>.

**Conflict of Interests**

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

**Ethical Standards**

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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