



SOVEREIGN CONNECTIVITY STATECRAFT: KAZAKHSTAN'S MIDDLE-POWER DIPLOMACY AND CENTRAL ASIAN AGENCY IN A FRAGMENTING EURASIA

FEDERICO VERRI* 

British International School of Timișoara, Romania

Article History:

Received: 2 May 2026

Revised: 13 June 2026

Accepted: 17 June 2026



ABSTRACT. *This article develops the concept of sovereign connectivity statecraft to explain how Kazakhstan seeks to convert geography, multi-vector diplomacy, transport corridors, resource endowment, institutional credibility, and regional public-good provision into autonomous bargaining capacity in a fragmented Eurasian order. The study is a conceptual review supported by qualitative document analysis of peer-reviewed scholarship, Kazakhstani policy documents, institutional reports, and recent trade, corridor, and resource data. It argues that multi-vector diplomacy remains necessary but insufficient: it describes Kazakhstan's diversified external relations, whereas sovereign connectivity statecraft identifies the mechanism through which those relations are translated into usable routes, rules, partnerships, and regional services. The analysis specifies five mutually reinforcing pillars: sovereignty, balance, connectivity, institutional resilience, and regional public goods. Applied to the Middle Corridor, uranium and critical-mineral diplomacy, energy diversification, and regional consultation, the framework shows that Kazakhstan's agency grows only when connective assets are matched by logistical reliability, domestic upgrading, transparent governance, and respect for neighboring states' autonomy. The contribution is conceptual and empirical: it separates connectivity-based agency from hedging, geoeconomics, and ordinary multi-vectorism while grounding each pillar in traceable public indicators. The article concludes that Kazakhstan has acquired conditional platform-state functions, but these remain vulnerable to corridor bottlenecks, commodity concentration, implementation gaps, and geopolitical asymmetry.*

KEYWORDS: *Kazakhstan, Central Asia, multi-vector diplomacy, middle power, sovereign connectivity, Middle Corridor, geoeconomics, regional public goods.*

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia is usually read through other people's strategies. In that reading, the region becomes China's corridor, Russia's historical sphere, Europe's alternative supply route, an American strategic concern, or a resource frontier for global markets. Each framing identifies a genuine structural pressure. Each also risks turning Central Asian states into objects of great-power competition rather than authors of their own constraints and choices. Kazakhstan is a useful place to test the problem, because it combines exposure with capacity: geographically central, resource-rich, diplomatically busy, institutionally consequential within the region, and deeply affected by the fragmentation of the Eurasian political economy.

*Correspondence to: Federico Verri, email: federico.verri@britishschool-timisoara.ro

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s). Published by the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

JOURNAL OF
CENTRAL ASIAN
STUDIES
<https://jcas-journal.com>

I argue that Kazakhstan's contemporary foreign policy is best understood as an attempt to practice sovereign connectivity statecraft — a form of foreign policy in which a middle or secondary power deliberately converts diversified diplomacy, connective infrastructure, institutional reliability, and regional services into autonomous bargaining capacity, while refusing exclusive dependence on any single external actor. The term keeps the core insight of multi-vector diplomacy, that Kazakhstan cultivates several centers of power at once, and then moves past them. Multi-vector diplomacy describes how external relations are distributed. Sovereign connectivity statecraft describes how those relations are made to pay: routes are made reliable, institutional formats are kept alive, regulatory credibility is built, and national advantage is converted into services the region can use.

The claim is bounded on purpose. Kazakhstan is not a great power, and its foreign policy is not unconstrained. Its influence is conditional, issue-specific, and relational. What matters is that Kazakhstan's foreign-policy agency, defined here as autonomous bargaining capacity under asymmetric conditions, can still operate when it runs through identifiable institutions, corridors, value chains, and regional formats. This framing answers a recurring need in the Central Asia literature: to get past the binary of dependence or autonomy. Kazakhstan is exposed to Russia's security and infrastructural weight, China's economic and logistical footprint, Europe's appetite for supply-chain diversification, Türkiye's expanding Trans-Caspian engagement, and the distinct priorities of its Central Asian neighbors. Kazakhstan's agency, on this account, does not come from escaping those pressures. It comes from structuring them so that they widen rather than narrow the country's room for maneuver.

Three questions organize what follows. First, how does sovereign connectivity statecraft differ from multi-vector diplomacy, hedging, middle-power diplomacy, and geoeconomic statecraft? Second, which features of Kazakhstan's recent foreign policy suggest a shift from defensive balancing toward a more productive, connectivity-based strategy? Third, what constraints stop Kazakhstan's geography, corridors, and resources from translating into durable regional agency? I answer through a conceptual review and qualitative document analysis of academic literature, Kazakhstani policy texts, institutional reports, and economic evidence.

The contribution is threefold. Conceptually, the article specifies sovereign connectivity statecraft as a distinct analytical category with necessary components and observable indicators. Theoretically, it connects literatures usually kept apart — middle-power behavior, small-state agency, hedging, geoeconomics, infrastructure and connectivity politics, regionalism, and public goods. Empirically, it uses Kazakhstan to show how a Central Asian state can become a regional platform without lapsing into either a passive transit space or a coercive regional hegemon. The reading is cautiously positive. Kazakhstan has built meaningful platform-state functions; their credibility depends on implementation, on the quality of domestic institutions, on corridor reliability, and on whether leadership is framed as service to regional agency rather than hierarchy over neighbors. The remainder of the article defines the concept, sets out the method, reviews the relevant literature, presents five findings, synthesizes them into the five-pillar framework, and closes with constraints and policy implications.

CONCEPTUAL POSITIONING: DEFINING SOVEREIGN CONNECTIVITY STATECRAFT

Sovereign connectivity statecraft is defined here as the purposeful use of diversified external partnerships, connective infrastructure, regulatory credibility, and regional public-good provision by a middle or secondary power to widen autonomous policy space under conditions of geopolitical fragmentation. Five components are necessary, and the concept does not hold if any is missing. The state must face structural exposure to larger powers or external shocks. It must hold some connective asset — territory, transport routes, energy networks, digital infrastructure, convening power, strategic commodities. It must pursue diversified partnerships rather than exclusive alignment. It must embed connectivity in institutions, rules, or policy coordination, not lean on geography alone. And it must turn national advantage into services that others can use, so that the connection itself generates bargaining value and legitimacy.

So defined, the concept can be told apart from its neighbors. Multi-vector diplomacy concerns the management of relations with several major partners. Hedging concerns the mix of returns-maximizing and risk-contingency behavior under uncertainty. Middle-power diplomacy emphasizes status, niche competence, and coalition-building. Geoeconomic statecraft concerns the strategic use of economic instruments for political ends. Sovereign connectivity statecraft overlaps all four without collapsing into any of them. Its distinctive move is to explain how a state turns the infrastructure and governance of connection into an instrument of autonomy. The operative question is not only who Kazakhstan balances among, but how it makes its territory, institutions, corridors, resource partnerships, and regional formats useful enough that external actors must deal with it on negotiated terms.

The concept is not Kazakhstan-specific. In principle, it travels to other middle or secondary states whose geography, infrastructure, or institutional credibility lets them mediate flows between larger political-economic spaces. Kazakhstan is simply an unusually strong case: post-Soviet multi-vector diplomacy, land-linked geography, a hydrocarbon and uranium base, critical-mineral prospects, a Caspian position, and a Central Asian convening role pack the necessary components together more densely than most comparators. It therefore works both as a case illustration and as a theory-building site for a concept with wider comparative potential.

Empirically, the strategy can be spotted through observable indicators: diversification of external partnerships; investment in routes, ports, logistics, customs, and digital coordination; agreements that link resources to value-chain upgrading; domestic reforms that raise regulatory credibility; and regional initiatives that supply services to neighbors rather than merely extract advantage from them. None of these indicators proves success. They establish the presence of a strategy. Whether it works is a separate judgment — whether connectivity reduces vulnerability, expands bargaining capacity, generates domestic development spillovers, and avoids dependence on a single partner or corridor.

Table 1. Operationalization of Key Variables

Adjacent concept	Primary analytical focus	Limitations of this article	Added value of sovereign connectivity statecraft
Multi-vector diplomacy	Diversified relations with multiple external powers.	Identifies diplomatic distribution but does not explain how infrastructure, institutions, and regional services turn diversification into agency.	Shows how diversified relations become productive capacity through routes, rules, partnerships, and services.
Hedging	Risk-management under uncertainty through mixed alignment choices.	Often emphasizes avoidance of loss rather than proactive creation of strategic options.	Treats connectivity as a mechanism for expanding policy space, not only limiting exposure.
Middle-power diplomacy	Niche competence, coalition-building, institutional activism, and functional influence.	Can drift into status-claiming if not tied to specific mechanisms of influence.	Links the middle-power function to concrete connective assets and regional public goods.
Geoeconomic statecraft	Use of economic instruments for strategic and political objectives.	May foreground coercion, market leverage or sanctions over infrastructural mediation and regional service provision.	Explains how transport, value chains, and regulatory reliability can be used non-coercively to increase autonomy.
Platform state	A state that hosts and coordinates cross-border flows, markets or institutional interfaces.	Describes an empirical role but not the foreign-policy mechanism that produces it.	Treats platform status as one possible empirical expression of sovereign connectivity statecraft.

Source: author's elaboration.

Note. The table separates the proposed concept from neighboring literatures while acknowledging overlap, and isolates the analytical work the concept is meant to do.

METHODOLOGY: CONCEPTUAL REVIEW AND QUALITATIVE DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

This is a conceptual review supported by qualitative document analysis — not a systematic review, a statistical test, or an interview study. Its purpose is to refine an analytical framework and apply it to Kazakhstan's current foreign-policy position. It is conceptual in its primary contribution and review-based in its evidence: the framework is the argument, and Kazakhstan is the case through which it is built and then tested against current public data. The reasoning moves in both directions. Deductively, the starting categories came from the literature on middle powers, hedging, geoeconomics, regionalism, and connectivity politics. Inductively, those categories were revised against Kazakhstan-specific documents, corridor evidence, policy reports and economic indicators until the five-pillar framework settled as the most parsimonious synthesis. The framework, in other words, was neither imposed before reading the sources nor read off them naïvely; it emerged from the iteration between the two.

The cited corpus comprises thirty-four sources. They fall into five groups: peer-reviewed articles and academic books on Central Asian agency, multi-vector diplomacy, small-state and middle-power behavior, hedging, geoeconomics and regionalism; official Kazakhstani policy documents; institutional reports from bodies such as the World Bank, the OECD, CAREC, the Asian Development Bank, the European Commission and the

International Energy Agency; and current economic, trade, corridor and resource data from the World Bank, the Bureau of National Statistics of Kazakhstan, the Observatory of Economic Complexity, the World Nuclear Association, World Integrated Trade Solution and publicly available transport reporting. The search combined targeted terms — Kazakhstan foreign policy, multi-vector diplomacy, Kazakhstan middle power, Central Asian agency, Middle Corridor, Trans-Caspian transport, Kazakhstan critical minerals, geoeconomics, hedging, omni-enmeshment, regional public goods, connectivity politics. Sources were located through publisher pages, Google Scholar, institutional repositories, official organization websites, and reference chaining from relevant studies.

The period of interest runs from 2020 to 2026, and two dates anchor it. The first, 2020, is doctrinal: it marks the adoption of Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy Concept for 2020–2030, which reframes strategic autonomy as a development objective and supplies the policy baseline for the analysis. The second, 2022, is geopolitical: Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the sanctions regime that followed, and the search for routes that bypass Russian territory together moved the Trans-Caspian corridor from a secondary option to a policy priority. A third driver, green-transition supply-chain concern, gathered force across the same window and pushed uranium and critical minerals up the agenda. Foundational works published before 2020 were kept where they supply theoretical baselines — on small-state agency, middle-power diplomacy, hedging, economic statecraft, geoeconomics, and earlier studies of Kazakhstan's multi-vector diplomacy.

Inclusion followed four criteria. A source had to bear on at least one of Kazakhstan's foreign policy, Central Asian regional agency, middle-power or secondary-state behavior, transport and connectivity politics, geoeconomic statecraft, resource diplomacy, institutional resilience or regional public goods. It had to offer conceptual value, Kazakhstan-specific evidence, institutional data, or traceable policy documentation. Excluded were promotional commentary, unsigned claims without institutional authority, untraceable figures, and material that could not be tied to the research questions. Analysis ran in three stages: conceptual mapping of adjacent theories; coding of the Kazakhstan evidence against sovereignty, balance, connectivity, institutional resilience, and regional public goods; and synthesis into the framework. To keep the framework falsifiable rather than merely illustrative, each pillar is paired in the synthesis with current, publicly sourced quantitative referents (Table 4); these are descriptive secondary indicators, not primary data, and are reported as ranges where sources diverge. Where a claim rested on grey literature — a policy brief or a thesis — I treated it as indicative and sought peer-reviewed or institutional corroboration before allowing it to carry weight.

The method has several limitations. It draws on public sources and so cannot reconstruct closed diplomatic decision-making. Corridor data are uneven, because national authorities, reporting agencies, and institutional reports use different baselines and categories; figures are therefore read as orders of magnitude, not precise measurements. I mitigate these limits by triangulating across academic literature, official policy documents, and institutional evidence, and by treating the framework as an interpretation rather than proof of strategic success. As a review and document-based study, it involved no human participants and required no human-subjects ethical approval.

Table 2. Documentary corpus and analytical function

Source category	Selection logic	Analytical function	Main limitation
Academic theory	Middle-power, small-state agency, hedging, geoeconomics, regionalism, and connectivity literature.	Defines the conceptual gap and stops Kazakhstan – specific claims from becoming purely descriptive.	Theory may be drawn from other regions and needs careful adaptation.
Kazakhstan – specific scholarship	Research on multi-vector diplomacy, Central Asian integration, Kazakhstan as a middle power, and Middle Corridor politics.	Anchors the conceptual argument in the existing Kazakhstan literature.	Some recent sources are still emerging and not yet widely tested.
Official policy texts	Foreign Policy Concept 2020–2030 and related official framing of autonomy and development.	Ties scholarly interpretation to stated doctrine and policy priorities.	Declared objectives are not the same as implementation outcomes.
Institutional reports	World Bank, OECD, CAREC/ ADB, European Commission, and IEA materials on corridors, raw materials, and development.	Supplies traceable evidence and cross-national benchmarks.	Reports can be policy-oriented and should be read alongside academic work.
Economic and corridor data	World Bank/WITS indicators and recent Trans-Caspian reporting.	Tests whether connectivity and capacity claims have observable support.	Data are uneven and should be read cautiously, not deterministically.

Source: author's elaboration.

Note. The corpus was built for conceptual synthesis and triangulation, not for exhaustive systematic review.

LITERATURE REVIEW: FROM GREAT-POWER COMPETITION TO CONNECTIVITY-BASED AGENCY

Two broad approaches have long shaped the study of Central Asia. One foregrounds great-power competition and external influence; the other foregrounds domestic institution-building, rent distribution, post-Soviet legacies, and regime dynamics. Both remain necessary, and both can understate the capacity of Central Asian states to set the terms of external engagement. Blank's account of a renewed "Great Game" captures the competitive backdrop vividly, yet like most external-power framings it tends to read the region as terrain rather than as a field of actors (Blank, 2012). Cooley shows the corrective: external powers must operate through local political rules, not above them (Cooley, 2012). Costa Buranelli makes a parallel point from the multilateral side, showing that Central Asian states signal preferences and status through international institutions (Costa Buranelli, 2014). Together these works fix the article's starting point — Kazakhstan's agency should be read through the interaction of constraint and strategy, not through structural determinism or celebratory autonomy.

Kazakhstan is most often associated with multi-vector diplomacy. Cummings (2003) traced the tension between Eurasian identity, state-building, and a multi-vector posture. Hanks (2009) read multi-vectorism as a pragmatic answer to geography and external pressure. Contessi (2015) sharpened the mechanics, describing diversification, issue-splitting, and co-alignment as the tools through which medium-sized states cut dependence. More recent work argues that the pattern has grown more geoeconomic and

more institutionalized under President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev (Nyshanbayev et al., 2024), and that Central Asian integration can reinforce rather than dilute Kazakhstan's national interests (Zhunissoev et al., 2025). Yuneman's analysis of Kazakhstan's voting on UN General Assembly resolutions shows the same diversification logic at work in formal multilateral signalling, where alignment is calibrated rather than fixed (Yuneman, 2023).

The middle-power literature specifies what kind of influence Kazakhstan can plausibly claim. Middle powers are not simply states of intermediate size; they are defined behaviorally and functionally by coalition-building, niche diplomacy, problem-solving, support for institutionalized cooperation, and the capacity to shape particular issue areas beyond what raw size would predict (Cooper et al., 1993; Kussainova et al., 2025). This is a useful brake on overstatement. Kazakhstan should not be analyzed as a great power. Its influence reads more credibly as functional, sectoral, and relational: mediation, logistics, energy security, resource supply, regional coordination, and institutional convening. Cornell situates that trajectory within a wider rise of Central Asian middle powers, though such accounts are best treated as framing arguments to be tested rather than settled findings (Cornell, 2024).

Small-state and secondary-state agency supply a second anchor. Keohane's classic treatment draws attention to the strategic dilemmas of actors with limited material power but not zero agency (Keohane, 1969). Hedging develops the insight, showing how weaker states blend engagement and insurance when the future is uncertain (Kuik, 2016). Goh's omni-enmeshment shows how secondary actors try to embed great powers in institutional and regional arrangements that blunt domination and stabilize expectations (Goh, 2008). All three speak directly to Kazakhstan, and all three leave the same residue: they explain diversified positioning and risk management more fully than they explain the productive governance of connection itself.

Geoeconomics narrows that residue but does not close it. Baldwin (1985) framed economic statecraft as the use of economic instruments for political ends. Luttwak (1990), and later Wigell and Vihma (2016), drew the line between geopolitical and geoeconomic logics, showing how commercial instruments, market access, and dependencies shape outcomes. Kazakhstan's corridors, hydrocarbons, uranium, critical minerals, and logistics are plainly geoeconomic assets. But sovereign connectivity statecraft is narrower than geoeconomics as a whole. It is not about economic power in general, and not primarily about coercion; it is about a middle power's ability to make itself a credible connector across fragmented political-economic spaces.

Regionalism, regional public goods, and connectivity politics complete the frame. Regions, on the constructivist reading, are not fixed geographical facts but political projects produced through institutions, flows, identities, and policy coordination (Söderbaum, 2016). Public-goods scholarship explains why leadership is more legitimate when it supplies benefits others can use than when it asserts hierarchy (Kaul et al., 1999). Connectivity research adds the warning that infrastructure is never merely technical — routes, ports, standards and interoperability generate cooperation and contestation in equal measure (Gaens et al., 2023). For Kazakhstan, this means the Middle Corridor and its value-chain agreements cannot be read as transport

projects alone. They are political instruments whose strategic value turns on reliability, regulatory coordination, domestic upgrading, and regional legitimacy.

The literature, therefore, leaves a specific space. Multi-vector diplomacy explains diversification; hedging explains risk management; middle-power theory explains functional influence; geoeconomics explains the strategic use of economic instruments; and regionalism and public goods explain the legitimacy of cooperative leadership. None explains how a state converts connection itself into agency. Sovereign connectivity statecraft is the attempt to integrate these insights around that question and Kazakhstan is an apt case, because it increasingly seeks to govern, institutionalize, and profit from the very flows that expose it.

FINDINGS

Finding 1. Multi-vector diplomacy has become more geoeconomic and institutionally anchored

Kazakhstan's multi-vector diplomacy began as a way to avoid exclusive dependence in a hard neighborhood. That core logic survives. What has changed is its register. The strategy is no longer only about keeping channels open to Russia, China, the European Union, the United States, Türkiye, and regional organizations; it now runs through economic corridors, value chains, institutionalized partnerships, and development goals. Balancing, in short, has become more productive less about avoiding overdependence, more about building platforms on which several external actors can engage Kazakhstan despite the tensions among them.

The Foreign Policy Concept for 2020–2030 matters here precisely because it ties foreign policy to concrete benefits for the state, business, and society (Akorda, 2020). That is not a rhetorical flourish. It signals that strategic autonomy is being framed as development capacity: multi-vector diplomacy remains the technique, but its payoff is measured in investment options, logistics access, market diversification, resource partnerships, and institutional credibility. The evidence supports a bounded claim and no more. Kazakhstan has not swapped balancing for connectivity. It is trying to make connectivity one of the principal instruments through which balancing produces autonomy.

Finding 2. Kazakhstan's middle-power role is strongest when defined functionally

Kazakhstan's middle-power credentials are most persuasive as functions, not status. The useful question is not whether Kazakhstan occupies a rung on some abstract hierarchy, but whether it performs middle-power functions in particular issue areas. The literature and the evidence point to several: diplomatic convening, a nuclear non-proliferation legacy, regional consultation, energy and uranium supply, critical-mineral partnerships, transport-corridor participation, and engagement with international institutions. These let Kazakhstan exercise influence that is sectoral rather than general, relational rather than coercive, and grounded in credibility rather than material dominance.

This functional reading also clarifies how national interest sits with Central Asian cooperation. Kazakhstan's sovereignty is not necessarily diluted by regional integration; it can be reinforced when Central Asia becomes more coordinated, more

investable, and less exposed to external fragmentation. The careful formulation is this: Kazakhstan's external role gains credibility when its national advantages are converted into regional services — transport coordination, water-energy dialogue, food-security cooperation, education networks, trade facilitation, diplomatic consultation. Framed this way, Kazakhstan's leadership becomes an empirical proposition to be tested against the services it actually supplies, not a virtue to be assumed.

Finding 3. The Middle Corridor creates opportunity, but not automatic transformation

The Middle Corridor anchors Kazakhstan's connectivity narrative. It underwrites the shift from a landlocked self-image toward a land-linked role connecting China, Central Asia, the Caspian, the South Caucasus, Türkiye, and Europe — and the recent numbers are striking. Total cargo on the Trans-Caspian corridor rose by roughly 62 percent in 2024 to about 4.5 million tonnes, up from well under one million tonnes before 2022; reported figures for that year range from about 4.1 to 4.5 million tonnes across operators, and the spread is worth noting in its own right, since it illustrates the data unevenness flagged in the method (OECD, 2025; Birbayeva, 2026). Container traffic, still modest in absolute terms — around 77,000 TEU in 2025 against a 300,000 target for 2029 — has grown fastest, and a recent assessment reaches a broadly similar reading of the corridor's strategic potential (Assylkhanov, 2025). The World Bank projects that, with the right investment and reform, annual transit could approach 11 million tonnes by 2030 (World Bank, 2023), while the OECD treats the route as strategically important on the condition that its effectiveness rests on policy reform, coordination, and logistics efficiency rather than on track and tonnage alone (OECD, 2025).

Balance is needed here. Even at its 2024 peak, corridor throughput stayed far below the capacity of the northern, Russia-transiting route, so for now the Middle Corridor complements rather than replaces the established Eurasian options (OECD, 2025). It still lacks the capacity, cost structure, predictability, and institutional integration to substitute for all of them, and it contends with Caspian bottlenecks including declining sea levels that bear directly on port and ferry reliability alongside weather disruption, customs delays, tariff-harmonization problems, infrastructure gaps, and coordination across several sovereign jurisdictions. Independent corridor-performance monitoring along the CAREC network documents exactly this friction: persistent border-crossing delays and uneven transit speeds that no single government can fix alone (CAREC, 2025). None of this voids the corridor's strategic value; it qualifies it. The route strengthens Kazakhstan's agency only if it becomes reliable enough to attract sustained commercial use and deep enough to generate domestic value beyond transit fees.

“Corridor deepening” names that condition. It refers to the build-out around the route — logistics services, port capacity, rail interoperability, customs digitalization, documentation standards, industrial zones, value-added processing, and regional information-sharing. Without it, Kazakhstan risks becoming a passage for other actors' trade. With it, the Middle Corridor can do real work as an instrument of sovereign connectivity statecraft: a route that widens Kazakhstan's bargaining capacity while feeding regional economic resilience.

Finding 4. Resource diplomacy is shifting toward value-chain governance

Kazakhstan's resource base stays central to its international position — hydrocarbons, uranium, metals, grain, and critical raw materials. But the terms of resource diplomacy are moving. Energy transition, supply-chain security, and Europe's search for alternative suppliers have raised the salience of uranium, critical minerals, battery inputs, and renewable-hydrogen prospects. The EU–Kazakhstan strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials, batteries, and renewable hydrogen is the clearest marker of how resource diplomacy now intersects with green-transition geopolitics and value-chain formation (European Commission, 2022; International Energy Agency, 2025). The scale here is real, not rhetorical: Kazakhstan has been the world's largest uranium producer since 2009 and supplies roughly 43 percent of global primary output, with the state operator Kazatomprom alone accounting for about a fifth of world production in 2024 (World Nuclear Association, 2026). Radioactive chemicals now sit among the country's top-three export categories, and Kazakhstan ranks as the world's leading exporter of them (Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025).

The strategic question is not export volume. It is whether partnerships build processing capacity, technology transfer, environmental and social governance, skilled employment, and domestic industrial upgrading. Two recent episodes show this working as policy rather than theory. In 2024, Kazakhstan's uranium output ran roughly a fifth below permitted levels, held back by a shortage of sulphuric acid and by construction delays at new deposits — a blunt reminder that an extractive position is only as strong as the inputs and infrastructure behind it (World Nuclear Association, 2026). At the same time, the rules now governing foreign expansion in the sector permit it only where the national company holds a controlling stake or where partners transfer conversion and enrichment technology — value-chain governance written directly into statecraft (World Nuclear Association, 2026). Kazakhstan gains autonomy as it moves from raw-material supplier toward trusted, regulated, and increasingly value-adding partner; it loses it if global demand for secure inputs simply reproduces an extractive pattern in which value is captured elsewhere. Sovereign connectivity statecraft, therefore, requires resource diplomacy to be wired to domestic regulation, contract transparency, human-capital development, and infrastructure investment, or the resource endowment hardens into a ceiling rather than a lever.

Finding 5. Domestic institutional credibility is an external asset

The review supports a last finding that is easy to state and hard to deliver: domestic institutional quality is part of Kazakhstan's foreign-policy credibility, not separate from it. Geography and resources attract attention. Durable partnerships, though, depend on predictable rules, administrative capacity, dispute resolution, transparency, and public trust. For a state whose whole strategy rests on persuading multiple external actors that it can serve as a reliable platform, this is not a side issue.

The macroeconomic picture shows the regional weight that makes the strategy plausible and the exposure that qualifies it. World Bank figures put 2024 GDP at about US\$288.4 billion, growth at 5.0 percent, and GDP per capita at US\$14,154.6 (World Bank, 2026). National statistics report 2024 goods exports of roughly US\$81.6 billion, imports

of US\$59.8 billion, and total goods trade near US\$141.4 billion (Bureau of National Statistics, 2025; World Integrated Trade Solution, 2026). By Central Asian standards, these are large numbers. They are also concentrated ones: crude petroleum alone accounts for close to half of goods exports, with gold, radioactive chemicals, and copper making up much of the remainder (Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025). That concentration is the empirical face of the commodity-dependence risk and the reason the leverage runs both ways. Domestic modernization strengthens foreign policy on three fronts: it attracts higher-quality investment, it raises the developmental spillovers of corridors and resources, and it makes regional leadership credible because it rests on problem-solving capacity rather than size.

SYNTHESIS: FIVE PILLARS OF SOVEREIGN CONNECTIVITY STATECRAFT

The framework earns its keep when each pillar does distinct causal work. Sovereignty is the normative boundary — it defines what external partnerships must not compromise. Balance is the diplomatic technique — it diversifies relations and forecloses exclusive alignment. Connectivity is the material and regulatory instrument — it turns geography, infrastructure, and interoperability into usable capacity. Institutional resilience is the credibility condition — it decides whether partners trust Kazakhstan’s commitments and whether connectivity yields domestic upgrading. Regional public goods are the legitimacy mechanism — they convert national advantage into benefits for neighbors and so soften the perception that leadership is hierarchical.

Interdependent, yes; interchangeable, no. Sovereignty without balance slides toward isolation. Balance without connectivity stays symbolic. Connectivity without institutional resilience becomes vulnerable infrastructure. Institutional resilience without regional public goods can strengthen the state while failing to legitimize regional leadership. And regional public goods without sovereignty and balance expose Kazakhstan to commitments it cannot sustain. The framework thus explains both the opportunity and the fragility of Kazakhstan’s position, the two are produced by the same structure.

Table 3. Five-pillar framework with analytical function and indicators

Pillar	Distinct analytical function	Empirical indicators in Kazakhstan	Main limitation or risk
Sovereignty	Sets the normative boundary of external engagement and preserves autonomous decision-making.	Foreign Policy Concept 2020–2030: insistence on diversified external relations and independent policy space.	Autonomy can be constrained by asymmetric dependence on routes, markets, or security relationships.
Balance	Operates as a diplomatic technique for reducing overdependence and keeping room to maneuver.	Relations with Russia, China, the EU, the United States, Türkiye, regional organizations, and Central Asian neighbors.	Balancing becomes costlier as geopolitical polarization deepens.
Connectivity	Provides the material and regulatory instrument that turns geography into usable capacity.	Middle Corridor, Trans-Caspian transport, rail and port logistics, customs digitalization, energy routes, and value chains.	Infrastructure can create exposure if reliability, coordination, and domestic value capture stay weak.

Institutional resilience	Creates the credibility condition for long-term partnerships and domestic spillovers.	Administrative capacity, regulatory predictability, governance reform, dispute resolution, and implementation quality.	Institutional gaps undercut the credibility of corridor and investment ambitions.
Regional public goods	Supplies the legitimacy mechanism for non-coercive regional leadership.	Transport coordination, water-energy dialogue, food security, education links, disaster preparedness, and diplomatic consultation.	Leadership may read as hierarchy unless grounded in consultation and reciprocal benefit.

Source: author's elaboration.

Note. The five pillars are analytically distinct but mutually reinforcing. It is their interaction, rather than any single pillar, that constitutes sovereign connectivity statecraft.

Table 4. Operationalizing the five pillars: current empirical referents (2022–2026)

Pillar	Current empirical referent	Source
Sovereignty	The Foreign Policy Concept 2020–2030 frames autonomy as a development goal; in the October 2024 referendum, about 70 percent backed new nuclear power, with the first plant slated to use Russian (Rosatom) reactors — autonomy exercised within, not outside, supplier asymmetry.	Akorda (2020); World Nuclear Association (2026)
Balance	Exports spread across Italy, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands; imports led by China and Russia — diversified outward, yet still neighbor-weighted on the import side.	Observatory of Economic Complexity (2025)
Connectivity	Trans-Caspian cargo about 4.5 million tonnes in 2024 (+62% year on year), up from under one million pre-2022; roughly 77,000 TEU in 2025 against a 300,000 target for 2029; potential near 11 million tonnes by 2030 — yet still well below Northern Corridor capacity.	OECD (2025); World Bank (2023); Birbayeva (2026)
Institutional resilience	GDP about US\$288.4 billion and 5.0% growth in 2024; goods trade near US\$141.4 billion; but crude petroleum is close to half of exports, and 2024 uranium output ran about 20% below permitted levels on input and construction constraints.	World Bank (2026); Bureau of National Statistics (2025); Observatory of Economic Complexity (2025); World Nuclear Association (2026)
Regional public goods	Intra-Central-Asian trade nearly quadrupled between 2010 and 2023 (about US\$2.7bn to US\$10.8bn); Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan freight rose around 16% in 2024–2025, with new cross-border rail capacity under construction.	OECD (2025)

Source: compiled by the author from the cited databases and institutional reports.

Note. The table pairs the qualitative indicators of Table 3 with current, traceable quantitative referents. Figures are descriptive secondary data drawn from public sources; where operators report different totals — notably for corridor volumes — a range is given rather than a single point estimate.

DISCUSSION: PLATFORM-STATE FUNCTIONS AS AN EMPIRICAL EXPRESSION

Platform-state analysis does not rival sovereign connectivity statecraft; it describes one way the strategy shows up in the world. A platform state facilitates cross-border flows

through political, economic, infrastructural, and regulatory networks. Kazakhstan can be said to develop platform-state functions when it hosts or coordinates transport corridors, diplomatic forums, energy flows, resource partnerships, and regional policy interfaces. Platform status is therefore an outcome to be assessed, not a title to be claimed.

On this reading, sovereign connectivity statecraft is the strategy, and platform-state function is one observable result. The functions are visible in the way external actors increasingly treat Kazakhstan as a regional interface for Central Asia and the wider Eurasian space. They can blunt dependence by diversifying engagement, raise bargaining capacity by making Kazakhstan necessary to regional projects, and tie domestic development to strategic relevance. They also generate exposure. A platform is valuable because many actors use it; it is vulnerable for the same reason.

The real risk is asymmetry, not engagement. Kazakhstan must manage Russia's historical and infrastructural role, China's trade and investment footprint, Europe's interest in secure commodities and routes, Türkiye's Trans-Caspian and Turkic engagement, and the independent priorities of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Credibility will turn on contractual fairness, balanced infrastructure ownership, transparent customs, debt sustainability, environmental standards, digital interoperability, and technology upgrading. Coordination, not domination, is the more plausible basis for Kazakhstan's regional influence and, given the asymmetries it sits among, very likely the only sustainable one.

CONSTRAINTS AND RISKS

The five-pillar framework also identifies the principal failure points of sovereign connectivity statecraft. Each pillar has a corresponding vulnerability, so five constraints deserve particular attention. The first is commodity dependence: oil, minerals, uranium and grain give Kazakhstan leverage, but they reproduce vulnerability if exports stay weakly processed, fiscally concentrated or hostage to price cycles. The second is corridor overstatement: the Middle Corridor has genuine potential, yet it is still bounded by capacity, cost, Caspian maritime limits, customs procedures, tariff coordination and multi-state implementation. The third is geopolitical pressure: balancing grows harder, and sometimes untenable, as relations among Russia, China, the European Union and the United States deteriorate.

The fourth risk is institutional credibility. Partners will judge Kazakhstan less by its strategic declarations than by regulatory consistency, dispute settlement, procurement transparency, customs efficiency, and the plain ability to implement. The fifth is regional sensitivity. Kazakhstan's regional role has to read as service and consultation, not hierarchy; the collective agency of Central Asian states is strengthened when Kazakhstan complements its neighbors' priorities and weakened the moment it appears to speak for the region without their buy-in. None of these risks defeats the concept of sovereign connectivity statecraft. They mark out the conditions under which Kazakhstan's connectivity-based agency succeeds or fails.

Table 5. Constraints, analytical risk, and mitigation priorities

Constraint	Analytical risk	Mitigation priority
Commodity dependence	Resource strength becomes vulnerability if value is captured mainly through unprocessed exports or volatile price cycles.	Tie resource diplomacy to processing capacity, skills, ESG standards, technology transfer, and fiscal diversification.
Corridor overstatement	Middle Corridor growth is constrained by Caspian capacity, customs delays, tariffs, weather, and multi-state coordination failures.	Prioritize reliability, digitalization, port capacity, rail interoperability, and harmonized procedures over symbolic announcements.
Geopolitical pressure	Polarization among major powers raises the cost of balance and narrows the room for maneuver.	Keep partnerships issue-specific, avoid exclusive alignment, and diversify routes and institutions.
Institutional credibility	Foreign-policy ambition is undercut by implementation gaps, regulatory uncertainty or weak dispute settlement.	Treat governance reform, transparency, and administrative competence as strategic infrastructure.
Regional sensitivity	Kazakhstan's leadership is read as a hierarchy by neighboring states.	Frame leadership as consultation and public-good provision, with neighbors as co-authors rather than recipients.

Source: author's elaboration.

Note. The table identifies conditions that may weaken or strengthen the proposed strategy, not deterministic outcomes.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Five policy implications follow from the framework, with each pillar generating at least one. First, because sovereignty sets the normative boundary and balance supplies the diplomatic technique, multi-vector diplomacy is best defined as principled strategic autonomy rather than mechanical equidistance: the goal is not equal distance from every actor but enough room to turn external partnerships into national and regional development. Second, because connectivity is the material and regulatory instrument, Middle Corridor policy fits sovereign connectivity statecraft only when it puts reliability before symbolism — port capacity, rail interoperability, customs digitalization, common documentation and tariff coordination matter far more for Kazakhstan's bargaining capacity than declaratory corridor politics.

Third, because resource diplomacy must support institutional resilience, critical-mineral and energy-transition partnerships do most for domestic upgrading when they carry processing, scientific cooperation, ESG standards, workforce development, and technology transfer, rather than locking in purely extractive arrangements. Fourth, because institutional resilience is the credibility condition, domestic institutional modernization should be treated as a foreign-policy asset in its own right: stable regulation, anti-corruption measures, judicial confidence, competent administration, and transparent procurement are conditions of external credibility, not merely internal housekeeping. Fifth, because regional public goods are the legitimacy mechanism, Kazakhstan can deepen water-energy coordination, food security, education networks, disaster preparedness, transport harmonization, and diplomatic consultation. Kazakhstan's connectivity-based agency is most defensible when it enlarges the collective agency of Central Asian states rather than standing in for it.

CONCLUSION

Kazakhstan's foreign policy is hard to read through alignment choices alone, and that difficulty is the point of this article. Sovereign connectivity statecraft offers a way to read it instead through the governance of connection — the work of making routes reliable, institutions credible, and national advantage useful to others. What the Kazakhstan case adds to the concept is a demonstration that the same structure produces both the opportunity and the fragility: the assets that make Kazakhstan a platform are the assets that expose it.

The five findings converge on this reading. Multi-vector diplomacy has become more geoeconomic and institutionally anchored; the middle-power role is strongest when defined by function rather than status; the Middle Corridor opens opportunity without guaranteeing transformation; resource diplomacy is migrating from export volume toward value-chain governance; and domestic institutional quality operates as an external asset. Taken together, they show that the Middle Corridor, critical raw materials, energy diversification, and platform-state functions can raise Kazakhstan's bargaining capacity, but only against corridor reliability, domestic upgrading, institutional credibility, and regional consultation. Where those conditions hold, conditional influence consolidates into agency; where they fail, the same connective assets become liabilities.

Three recommendations follow. For policy, Kazakhstan should prioritize corridor reliability over symbolic throughput, tie resource partnerships to processing and technology transfer rather than raw extraction, and frame regional leadership as public-good provision rather than primacy. For research, the framework invites comparative application to other middle powers, and, in the Kazakhstan case, systematic measurement of the indicators set out in Table 4 against subsequent years of corridor, trade, and resource data. For the wider study of the collective agency of Central Asian states, the lesson is to resist both caricatures: Kazakhstan is neither a pawn of great-power competition nor an unbound regional leader, and theories that need it to be one or the other will keep missing what it is actually doing. The open question — one this review can frame but not settle — is empirical: whether implementation, over the next decade, turns the platform Kazakhstan has built into durable weight, or exposes how much of it still rests on routes and rents it does not fully control.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This article is based exclusively on publicly available documents, academic literature, institutional reports, and economic data. It did not involve human participants, interviews, or private data, and therefore did not require human-subjects ethical approval.

FUNDING

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

FV: Conceptualization; methodology; formal analysis; investigation; data curation; writing — original draft; writing — review and editing.

REFERENCES:

1. Akorda. (2020, March 9). On the concept of the foreign policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020–2030. Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. https://www.akorda.kz/en/legal_acts/decrees/on-the-concept-of-the-foreign-policy-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-for-2020-2030
2. Assylkhanov, A. (2025). The Middle Corridor's impact on Kazakhstan: Foreign policy, economic development, and regional co-operation [Master's thesis, OSCE Academy in Bishkek]. OSCE Academy Repository. <https://mt.osce-academy.kg/handle/123456789/681>
3. Baldwin, D. A. (1985). *Economic statecraft*. Princeton University Press.
4. Birbayeva, A. (2026, March 10). Trans-Caspian transport route cargo volumes increase fivefold in seven years. *The Astana Times*. <https://astanatimes.com/2026/03/trans-caspian-transport-route-cargo-volumes-increase-fivefold-in-seven-years/>
5. Blank, S. (2012). Whither the new Great Game in Central Asia? *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 3(2), 147–160. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2012.03.005>
6. Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan. (2025). Foreign trade turnover of the Republic of Kazakhstan (January–December 2024). Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms. <https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/economy/foreign-market/publications/315588/>
7. CAREC. (2025, August). CAREC corridor performance measurement and monitoring annual report 2023. Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program. <https://cpmm.carecprogram.org/resources/carec-corridor-performance-measurement-and-monitoring-annual-report-2023/>
8. Contessi, N. P. (2015). Foreign and security policy diversification in Eurasia: Issue splitting, co-alignment, and relational power. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 62(5), 299–311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2015.1026788>
9. Cooley, A. (2012). *Great games, local rules: The new great power contest in Central Asia*. Oxford University Press.
10. Cooper, A. F., Higgott, R. A., & Nossal, K. R. (1993). *Relocating middle powers: Australia and Canada in a changing world order*. UBC Press.
11. Cornell, S. E. (2024). Kazakhstan and the rise of middle powers in Central Asia. *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*. https://www.cacianalyst.org/resources/pdf/240731_FT_Kaz.pdf
12. Costa Buranelli, F. (2014). May we have a say? Central Asian states in the UN General Assembly. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 5(2), 131–144. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2014.05.002>
13. Cummings, S. N. (2003). Eurasian bridge or murky waters between East and West? Ideas, identity and output in Kazakhstan's foreign policy. *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 19(3), 139–155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523270300660021>
14. European Commission. (2022, November 8). Strategic partnership between the European Union and Kazakhstan on sustainable raw materials, batteries and renewable hydrogen value chains. https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/news/strategic-partnership-between-european-union-and-kazakhstan-sustainable-raw-materials-batteries-and-2022-11-08_en
15. Gaens, B., Sinkkonen, V., & Vogt, H. (2023). Connectivity and order: An analytical framework. *East Asia*, 40, 209–228. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-023-09401-z>
16. Goh, E. (2008). Great powers and hierarchical order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing regional security strategies. *International Security*, 32(3), 113–157. <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2008.32.3.113>

17. Hanks, R. R. (2009). 'Multi-vector politics' and Kazakhstan's emerging role as a geo-strategic player in Central Asia. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 11(3), 257–267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448950903152110>
18. International Energy Agency. (2025, October 15). Kazakhstan–EU strategic partnership on raw materials. IEA Policies Database. <https://www.iea.org/policies/17664-kazakhstan-eu-strategic-partnership-on-raw-materials>
19. Kaul, I., Grunberg, I., & Stern, M. A. (Eds.). (1999). *Global public goods: International cooperation in the 21st century*. Oxford University Press.
20. Keohane, R. O. (1969). Lilliputians' dilemmas: Small states in international politics. *International Organization*, 23(2), 291–310. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081830003160X>
21. Kuik, C.-C. (2016). How do weaker states hedge? Unpacking ASEAN states' alignment behavior towards China. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 25(100), 500–514. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2015.1132714>
22. Kussainova, A., Sadri, H., & Yesbolatova, D. (2025). Positioning Kazakhstan as an emerging middle power in Central Asia. *Public Administration and Civil Service*, 1(92), 157–168. <https://doi.org/10.52123/1994-2370-2025-1369>
23. Luttwak, E. N. (1990). From geopolitics to geo-economics: Logic of conflict, grammar of commerce. *The National Interest*, 20, 17–23. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42894676>
24. Nyshanbayev, N., Tarman, B., Tolen, Z., Samay, A., & Agybay, Z. (2024). The Republic of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy: Re-evaluation under President Tokayev. *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences*, 45(3), 915–924. <https://doi.org/10.34044/j.kjss.2024.45.3.21>
25. Observatory of Economic Complexity. (2025). Kazakhstan (KAZ) exports, imports, and trade partners. OEC. <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/kaz>
26. OECD. (2025). *Enhancing the competitiveness of the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor in Central Asia*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/f261e7fa-en>
27. Söderbaum, F. (2016). *Rethinking regionalism*. Palgrave Macmillan/Bloomsbury Academic. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57303-2>
28. Wigell, M., & Vihma, A. (2016). Geopolitics versus geoeconomics: The case of Russia's geostrategy and its effects on the EU. *International Affairs*, 92(3), 605–627. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12600>
29. World Bank. (2023). *Middle Trade and Transport Corridor: Policies and investments to triple freight volumes and halve travel time by 2030*. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/40626>
30. World Bank. (2026). Kazakhstan data. World Bank Open Data. Retrieved June 13, 2026, from <https://data.worldbank.org/country/kazakhstan>
31. World Integrated Trade Solution. (2026). Kazakhstan trade at a glance: Most recent values. World Bank. Retrieved May 2, 2026, from <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountrySnapshot/en/KAZ/textview>
32. World Nuclear Association. (2026). Uranium and nuclear power in Kazakhstan. World Nuclear Association. <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-g-n/kazakhstan>
33. Yuneman, R. A. (2023). Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy: A case study of voting on UNGA resolutions. *Russia in Global Affairs*, 21(2), 141–162. <https://doi.org/10.31278/1810-6374-2023-21-2-141-162>
34. Zhunissov, Z., Uderbaeva, B., Kurmangali, M., Darkenbayev, A., & Tazhikov, A. (2025). Kazakhstan's foreign policy strategy within the framework of Central Asian integration. *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 33(1), 92–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2024.2396116>