



# EXTENDING OMNIDIRECTIONAL HEDGING THROUGH THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF SHELTER THEORY: SMALL-STATE STRATEGY IN KAZAKHSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN

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**ABSTRACT.** *This article examines the theoretical complementarity between shelter theory and omnidirectional hedging in the foreign policy of small and medium-sized states. Both approaches offer alternatives to traditional concepts such as balancing, bandwagoning, and neutrality, which often fail to explain the multidimensional strategies adopted by states operating in asymmetric geopolitical environments. The article argues that shelter theory and omnidirectional hedging can be integrated into a broader analytical framework by extending omnidirectional hedging to incorporate a social dimension drawn from shelter theory. The proposed framework is particularly relevant for Central Asia, where states navigate corresponding pressures from Russia, China, Western actors, and regional institutions. Through qualitative conceptual analysis and illustrative discussion of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the article demonstrates that hedging is not only a strategy of diplomatic, economic, and security diversification, but also a socially embedded process shaped by domestic legitimacy, societal openness, education, mobility, and public support. Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy and Uzbekistan's strategy of openness illustrate how social stability and societal development reinforce external diversification and strategic autonomy. By incorporating the social dimension into omnidirectional hedging, the article contributes to small-state foreign policy theory, hedging studies, and Eurasian studies.*

**KEYWORDS:** *foreign policy, small states, international relations, Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy, as a term, can be defined in various ways, depending on different levels – such as the individual, group, state, or group of states. However, most agree that it concerns the behavior of states toward other states and the entirety of their relations (As, 2018). When discussing the theoretical analysis of foreign policy, attention is given to how states respond to threats posed by opponents or threats arising from regional or systemic power shifts, what opportunities states have, and what difficulties they face in resisting them (Savic & Shirkey, 2017). Considering the threats to state security, the specific status of a country in the international system and potential aggressors, states adopt one or another foreign policy strategy. At the same time, their choice is influenced not only by external factors, such as the regional structure of states (who their neighbors are), the form of the international system (bipolar,

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multipolar), international norms, and culture, but also by internal aspects, such as the country's political system, including institutional stability, economic and geographical environment, public support, historical reputation (Dreyer & Jesse, 2016), the size of state, strength and capabilities (Telci & Rakipoglu, 2021). Importantly, in the context of the emerging Central Asian regional order, characterized by intensifying regional dynamics, institutional multiplicity, and the growing influence of China, these external and internal factors interact in more complex ways, particularly for small and medium-sized states seeking to preserve autonomy under conditions of great power competition.

These questions primarily shaped the foreign policies of states from their foundation (Savic & Shirkey, 2017) until the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This event led to the idea that liberal democracy, as a form of governance, had triumphed over all other philosophies, such as fascism and communism, and that the global economy was creating a homogeneous world culture, rendering states unnecessary (Drezner, 1998). As a result, the number of academic works examining how states, as subjects of international relations, respond to potential threats stagnated, because present realist and liberal explanations have not been properly integrated with newer rationalist insights and many contemporary works pay attention primarily to great powers and exclude small states<sup>1</sup> (Savic & Shirkey, 2017). At the same time, it is well established that the foreign policy strategies of secondary or small states, with a limited potential to change or at least influence the international order or protect their national interests using their own political or military means (Telci & Rakipoglu, 2021), are analyzed less frequently than those of major world powers and their foreign policies are generally seen as balancing, bandwagoning, neutrality or hedging (Veenendaal, 2024). Small states are usually defined as the weaker party in an asymmetric relationship, and they must prioritize among the costs of entrapment and abandonment. Until recently, the international relations (IR) literature has paid little theoretical attention to the actual diplomatic strategies for balancing different types of costs and navigating the dilemma of being between a rock and a hard place (Pedersen, 2023). Two comparatively recent theories emerge here – shelter and omnidirectional hedging (the latter may be seen as a branch of hedging strategy) – which describe how small states can navigate, balance, and reduce the costs of the dilemma of entrapment and abandonment. These theories appeared because certain empirical realities, such as Southeast Asia (in the case of omnidirectional hedging) or Iceland and other Scandinavian countries (in the case of shelter theory), did not fit neatly into previously established strategies. It is also agreed that both strategies are still theoretically underdeveloped and need to be applied and tested empirically e.g. shelter theory was used mainly for explanation of Scandinavian or Baltic States foreign policy (Wivel & Ingebritsen, 2019), while omnidirectional hedging was mainly used for explanation of Southeast Asia's (including Japan) (Suorsa, 2017) or Central Asia's (Sim & Aminjonov, 2022) foreign policy. In this regard, Central Asia provides a particularly relevant context for reassessing and refining foreign policy strategies applicable to small and medium-sized states. Located at the intersection of Russian, Chinese, Western, and regional interests, Central Asian states must navigate overlapping pressures while preserving autonomy, domestic stability, and strategic flexibility.

In this case, this article argues that shelter and omnidirectional hedging foreign policy strategies can be combined into a new theoretical model by presenting and comparing them with the purpose to expand omnidirectional hedging strategy analytical scope

<sup>1</sup> In this article, small states are understood not exclusively in demographic or territorial terms, but primarily as states with limited capacity to independently shape the regional or international order.

and making it more comprehensive by adding a social dimension based on shelter theory attributes. This would contribute to foreign policy analysis by placing both strategies in a whole spectrum of institutionalized foreign policy strategies – balancing, neutrality, or bandwagoning, and providing international relations specialists with a deeper understanding of shelter and omnidirectional hedging concepts and their main attributes.

At the same time, the article further contributes to the development of shelter and omnidirectional hedging strategies in IR literature on small-state diplomacy, showing how small states could apply these strategies by forming and developing their foreign policies. The analysis is limited to the perspective of small states themselves and does not examine how larger states respond to these strategies.

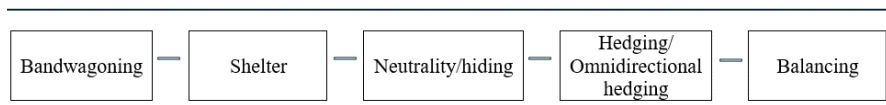
This article makes three key contributions to the literature on small-state foreign policy, hedging theory, and Eurasian studies. First, it extends the concept of omnidirectional hedging by incorporating a social dimension, addressing a key theoretical gap in existing frameworks. Second, it bridges shelter theory and hedging approaches into a unified analytical model applicable to small and medium-sized states operating in asymmetric geopolitical environments. Third, it provides a policy-relevant framework that improves understanding of how Central Asian states navigate great power competition while maintaining domestic stability, societal resilience, and strategic autonomy.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The article applies qualitative conceptual analysis and structured comparison of the two theoretical frameworks - for small and medium-sized states – shelter theory and omnidirectional hedging, focusing on their dimensions, assumptions, and explanatory scope. The analysis is based on primary and secondary sources: works of Olli Suorsa (2017), who developed the omnidirectional hedging strategy, and Baldur Thorhallsson, who developed shelter theory, as well as other authors like Wivel and A. Ingebritsen (2019), Pedersen, R. (2023), Munir, M. and Safdar, A (2024), Kuik, C.C. (2008), Rangsimaporn, P. (2023), etc. This approach focuses on theoretical synthesis, aiming to contribute to the development of small state foreign policy theory. Rather than proposing a universal model applicable to all regions, this article primarily focuses on small and medium-sized states operating in asymmetric geopolitical environments, particularly in post-Soviet Eurasia and Southeast Asia.

## 3. SHELTER STRATEGY IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF SMALL STATES

Shelter theory was developed to analyze the consequences of the relative power asymmetry that exists between great powers and small states and has been presented as an alternative to the existing theories (see Picture 1) of bandwagoning and hiding, which are used to ease the consequences of power asymmetries and manage the trade-offs between the costs of entrapment and abandonment (Pedersen, 2023).

**Picture 1.** Foreign policy strategies for small and medium sized states**Foreign policy strategies for small and medium sized states**

*Source: compiled by the authors*

This theory suggests that small states might need external shelter to cope with economic and political risks, it was introduced by Baldur Thorhallsson in 2011 (Thorhallsson, 2011). The need for such a theory appeared from the fact that international relations theory literature has limited analysis of small states' behaviour, and many of them assume that such countries operate on the same logic as great ones. Such equalization of states is incorrect, because small states face different disadvantages, have different needs, and a shelter is needed from a third party for their survival and prosperity (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2024). In this case, shelter theory can be understood as a small state's strategy, which aims to form alliances with a stronger country or seek membership in an international organization to reduce the political, economic, and societal vulnerabilities related to smallness (Wivel & Ingebritsen, 2019). These three spheres are the main attributes or dimensions according to shelter theory, and countries seek to increase their resilience here (Pedersen, 2023). Importantly, where regional dynamics are increasingly shaped by economic interdependence and China's expanding influence, shelter strategies may also reflect attempts by smaller states to mitigate risks associated with asymmetric engagement with major regional powers.

It is important to emphasize that shelter theory rejects the neorealists' approach that countries are functionally undifferentiated, facing the same challenges and opportunities. And while the bandwagoning strategy understands alliances as "aligning with the most powerful or threatening actor" (Kulali Martin, 2019), where small states simply follow the agenda of the great powers in the alliance (Pedersen, 2023), shelter theory insists that small states are fundamentally different and align not just for international security or status in the international system, but also to address internal weaknesses, like lack of various resources, indigenous knowledge, underdeveloped infrastructure, and limited public administration capacity, and how to overcome them. For this purpose, usually membership in different international organizations, e.g., the European Union, International Monetary Fund, Nordic Council, or cooperation with larger countries/powers is used. This internal weakness is accentuated because of the fact that traditional theories fail to consider the inherent structural weaknesses, including the ability of most small states to maintain the minimal state structures necessary to formulate and implement domestic policies, as well as whether small states shall maintain their presence (even minimal) at the international level (for example, Iceland). In this way, shelter theory offers a more comprehensive view of why small states seek support from larger powers and institutions (Thorhallsson et al., 2019).

Political shelter covers diplomatic, military, and the capacity of domestic political institutions backed by another state or international organization (Thorhallsson & Vidal,

2023). The necessity of political shelter and support from the third party is explained because of the facts, that small economies and low-population countries are militarily weak, have less power and fewer tools, including time, in disputes with other states, and it is harder to effectively run the country and ensure its functions. This shelter also explains why small states rely on international law and norms. The latter shapes the behaviour of large states and sets the standards for interactions between countries of different sizes. In this case, political shelter reduces the vulnerability of small states to coercion, decreases the power asymmetry between small and large states, and enables small states to act more effectively and functionally (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2019).

Economic shelter is considered a necessity for such small states that are vulnerable in productivity, investment, resources, domestic markets, trade, sectoral diversity, export dependence, fiscal institutions, and economic fluctuations (Kulali Martin, 2024). This need is explained by the fact that small states have tiny markets and are more reliant on the import and export of goods, and any shock or crisis in the market requires economic assistance from external financial authorities. In this case, large states are not so vulnerable because they have bigger domestic markets, resources and diversity (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2019). So, economic shelter might be described as a form of direct economic aid, help from an external financial body, a common market, favourable access to the markets (Thorhallsson and Vidal, 2023), and the formation of domestic buffers, which help to minimize the dangers from the international economy (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2019).

Societal shelter is the third and final principle of shelter theory and it addresses the fact that small states might experience isolation and societal stagnation, because of a lack of native knowledge (Thorhallsson & Vidal, 2024) – it is difficult to attract or raise influential artists, entrepreneurs or leaders who would enable generation of innovations and ideas, because of the small society and scale of economy, and the existing homogeneity, entrenched traditions and interests or risk aversion hinder the development of the market of ideas and challenge the existing elite, what leads to the reduced development of knowledge of the society (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2019). At the same time, the influence of big ideas from larger countries which might be also harmful to indigenous societies in this case (Hardy, 2024). To avoid such situations, small states try to circumvent isolation and social stagnation (Thorhallsson & Vidal, 2023) by creating good relations with other societies and developing economic cooperation, especially attracting investments, which allows them to receive new technologies and innovations (Mukhametov, 2020) and not to become only consumers of final products. Furthermore, the development of educational ties provides people from small states an opportunity to access the world's leading educational institutions (Thorhallsson & Vidal, 2024), which enables them to increase their native knowledge and bring new ideas to their own country. Such intersocietal interactions, transparency of borders, cultural sharing, new ideas, and innovation might be beneficial for all states (Yeliz, 2024).

What is more important to mention when speaking about the shelter strategy, even though it can improve the political, economic, and societal viability of small states, it can also cause costs that should be considered. One of the highest costs is the potential to give up sovereignty, as some small states may fully integrate into larger political entities or accept wide external influence to gain protection. This dependency can be used by shelter providers through political interference, cultural imposition, and economic

control. Furthermore, rescue efforts, such as financial support, often come with stringent conditions that weaken domestic autonomy and may even result in direct governance by foreign countries or organizations. Culturally, small states risk losing national identity due to the disproportionate influence of external media and values. Joining international organisations can be helpful, but it can also overwhelm small governments with limited staff and create extra rules they must follow (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2019).

The research on international relations even though admits contribution of the shelter theory for small states studies on regional cases or system level analysis, but at the same time express critics to it, because it is difficult to evaluate if a small state establishes an alliance in order to obtain support or because it considers said state as a threat and it should be treated as bandwagoning – as an example is taken Iceland's and China's cooperation in Arctic, where China is showing it's interest and increasing role in the region might be a threat. It is also complicated to assess if the gains cover losses, which are required for a good balance policy, especially for the social shelter (Yeliz, 2019). Furthermore, it's not fully discussed and explained what happens if a shelter provider changes its foreign policy position and abandons the recipient. In such cases, the latter has either to renegotiate or remain abandoned and risk being overwhelmed by other (regional) hegemony or overcome by environmental, economic, or financial crises (Baldachino, 2018). Besides, the theory itself tries to combine insights from (neo)realism, liberalism, and constructivism what might lead to the creation of a “theoretical mixed salad, where many ingredients go well but without a logically coherent whole” (Wivel and Ingebritsen, 2019). So, further development of the theory is needed, and it must show its ability to compete with less complex analytical constructs such as bandwagoning by using additional empirical cases (Wivel & Ingebritsen, 2019).

Thus, the search for shelter is not a simple process and has its advantages and disadvantages, as small states must navigate complex relationships that balance protection from the third party and sovereignty. When small states realize that their shelter starts exploiting them and harassing their independence, they might start looking for another shelter provider or providers to ensure their own security and reduce potential costs. For example, in the context of Central Asian countries, Russia was the most influential power for the region's countries and was responsible for the security, economic, and, can also be interpreted as, social spheres. Political regimes and elites of these countries treated it positively because they perceived Russia as a relatively predictable security and economic partner, despite underlying asymmetries and potential long-term risks. The situation has changed since 2014 and the first Russian territorial annexations in Ukraine, and because of that, the first bells rang for Central Asia. After the full Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it has become clear that the country, which was treated as a shelter from everything, is not trustworthy anymore, and some changes in foreign policy shall be applied. In such a case, hedging as a foreign policy strategy, and its form – omnidirectional hedging in particular – might be seen as a solution. As a result, many of these states have increasingly adopted diversification strategies associated with omnidirectional hedging, which allows them to navigate between multiple external partners while maintaining greater strategic flexibility and domestic stability. This transition provides an important conceptual bridge between shelter theory and hedging approaches.

#### 4. OMNIDIRECTIONAL HEDGING STRATEGY IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF SMALL STATES

Olli Suorsa introduced the concept of an omnidirectional hedging strategy to international relations theory in 2016. He stated that states are encouraged to broaden their cooperation beyond the binary decision because of the disproportionate losses involved in selecting between two large powers (what is the idea of a hedging strategy), because it might cause long-term political or strategic losses, like isolation or abandonment, which would lead a state to either balance or bandwagon with a great power (Munir & Safdar, 2024). In this case, states choose to place a higher priority on forming security, diplomatic, and economic ties with secondary or even tertiary powers in the area <sup>2</sup>. Such policy would lower tensions in the strategic environment while simultaneously expanding their strategic space inside the regional system (Suorsa, 2017). Diversifying connections and resources in the diplomatic, security, and economic domains delays or even eliminates the need to choose between two great powers, hence lowering asymmetric relationships with them, and this is known as a win-win situation (Nagy, 2017). At the same time, such diversification enables states to compensate for a variety of risks arising from high uncertainty (Rangsimaporn, 2023). Importantly, in the contemporary post-Soviet Eurasian regional order marked by overlapping pressures from Russia, China, Western actors, and regional institutions, as well as dense regional interdependence, such diversification strategies have become particularly relevant for small and medium-sized states seeking to preserve autonomy without direct confrontation.

As Suorsa Argues, the omnidirectional hedging strategy protects middle and small powers from several key issues:

1. *Avoiding entrapment* – by increasing the number of balancing actors, it becomes more difficult for a single major power to impose its will (Suorsa, 2016) and turn a state into a pawn in great power rivalries (Rangsimaporn, 2023).
2. *Preventing abandonment* – by differentiating relationships with other countries and involving several emerging or re-emerging regional and other regional powers – secondary or tertiary – benefits the actor by securing wider regional and international support with shared strategic interests, thus delivering mutual support and circumventing pressure from the remaining stronger side (Suorsa, 2017).
3. *Reducing interdependence in security* – diversifying two-sided security and military ties reduces reliance on a single provider of military technology and equipment (Suorsa, 2016), allowing the state greater flexibility in maneuvering.

According to Suorsa, omnidirectional hedging works as the diversification of a state's strategic relationships, offering small states a strategic alignment tool that, in comparison to bilateral hedging, enables them to more easily manage their relative strategic space. This becomes even more significant for states that frequently experience transitions between democracy and non-liberal rule, particularly following military or nonviolent coups, because it allows them to diversify diplomatic support and circumvent isolation in the international arena. Consequently, this guarantees strategic autonomy at both the systemic and unit levels (Suorsa, 2017).

In this case, Munir, M., and Safdar, A. simplified the definition, describing omnidirectional hedging as a strategy that permits traditional middle powers to increase their strategic space and escape the traps of great power rivalry through economic, diplomatic, and

<sup>2</sup> In his work, the authors spoke about the countries of Southeast Asia or ASEAN, where the interests of the United States and China mainly intersect, therefore he named Japan and India as countries playing a secondary role, and included Russia and South Korea as third.

security diversification (Munir & Safdar, 2024). These three dimensions directly correlate with shelter theory, where the diplomatic and security aspect is covered by political shelter, and the economic aspect remains common to both theories. Drawing forward upon the works of Suorsa (2016, 2017), Nagy (2017), and Gerstl (2020), the authors summarized the key attributes (dimensions) of the strategy, as indicated in Table 1. According to Munir, M., and Safdar, A., reviewing these dimensions and indicators allows us to verify whether a state's foreign policy is associated with omnidirectional hedging (Munir & Safdar, 2024). However, their analytical framework only partially responded to the main idea of Suorsa, Nagy, and Gerstl, because their analytical framework restricted strategy to middle powers and left small states aside. Theoretically, Munir and Safdar's presented model may also be extended to small states, as they also employ hedging strategies in their foreign policies. Moreover, the model's conceptual foundation is based on theoretical frameworks constructed for a broader spectrum of states, rather than being solely addressed to middle powers.

Speaking further about the criticisms of omnidirectional hedging and hedging strategy as such, it is noted that, as and for the shelter theory, its definition is not fully developed and it is difficult to find examples proving that such a strategy is used, as it is rarely presented in official state documents or foreign policy strategies presented by states (Wilkins, 2021). Another aspect used to express criticism is the argument that the analytical level of the hedging strategy is quite limited. It is argued that every state with options does not even attempt to hedge but simply uses it eventually without significant calculations. Therefore, introducing additional concepts into the theory of international relations is excessive and meaningless, especially since this strategy is difficult to define or verify (Wilkins, 2021). These arguments are like those, which are used for shelter theory.

**Table 1.** Dimensions and Indicators of Omnidirectional Hedging

| Dimensions | Indicators                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Diplomatic | Greater diplomatic support, joining new institutions/organizations, strategic engagement with adversary, neutrality and soft power                              |
| Economic   | Free trade agreements, joining financial institutions, participation in regional economic frameworks, expanding trade partners, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) |
| Security   | Joint exercises, security/defence pacts, arms trade, internal balancing                                                                                         |

Source: Munir, M. and Safdar, A. (2024). "Sino-U.S. Strategic Competition in the Asia-Pacific: Omnidirectional Hedging of Traditional Middle Powers". *Strategic Studies*, Vol. 43, Number 2(2), 21-44,

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The model presented by Munir, M. and Safdar, A. (2024) could be expanded by incorporating the factor of public support or the social dimension for the state's foreign policy and its institutions, because this element, as it is described in shelter theory, is one of the core aspects for the development of small states. Even though authors excluded such countries from their model, as explained above, such a decision contradicts the main ideas of the developers of hedging or omnidirectional hedging theories – Suorsa,

Nagy, Gerstl, or C.C. Kuik – who accentuated the applicability of their theory to small states. Incorporating this dimension is particularly important in Central Asia as part of the broader post-Soviet Eurasian order, where domestic stability, public opinion, and societal openness increasingly interact with external pressures.

Although the public support element is more difficult to measure in certain types of countries, such as authoritarian ones, its necessity remains important in the sense that if citizens do not grant a mandate to the foreign policy being implemented, it is highly likely that the government will face internal resistance, which may also trigger domestic political crises. This could be observed in Georgia at the end of 2024 (Gogia & Kirova, 2024), when the government decided to halt the EU accession process, in protests in Slovakia at the beginning of 2025 against the Prime Minister's pro-Russian policies (The Guardian, 2025), and in similar cases. As C.C. Kuik (2008) wrote, the ruling elite primarily concerns itself with political survival. Thus, after assessing the opportunities and potential threats of newly emerging or neighboring powers, it makes corresponding foreign and domestic policy decisions that enable it to consolidate its authority within the country. These decisions are based on economic, political, and security dimensions and are aimed at ensuring internal cohesion, which in turn legitimizes both the policies being implemented and the government itself (Kuik, 2008).

Therefore, the inclusion of a social dimension within the framework of omnidirectional hedging is essential. It allows us to link external diversification strategies with domestic legitimacy, explaining how foreign policy choices are sustained over time. This expanded framework is particularly useful for analyzing small and medium-sized states in Central Asia as part of the broader post-Soviet Eurasian order, where governments must simultaneously navigate overlapping pressures from Russia, China, Western actors, and regional institutions, while also managing economic interdependence and societal transformation.

## **5. THE SOCIAL DIMENSION IN OMNIDIRECTIONAL HEDGING STRATEGY. KAZAKHSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN AS CASE STUDIES**

Public support, or the societal dimension, for foreign policy issues is particularly important in democratic states, where society is more engaged and the institution of freedom of speech operates, as incorrect decisions will be quickly communicated and will most often result in removal from office (Baum, 2013), for example, through impeachment, protests, or subsequent elections. The choice of actions is determined by the consequences arising from the implementation of specific foreign policy decisions. The significance of public opinion is also explained by several studies – for instance, it has been established that after World War II, public opinion became one of the factors influencing presidential election voting results in the U.S., with foreign policy issues having a significant impact on voting behavior in five out of nine election campaigns, where voters rationally evaluated politicians' proposals. This connection is further confirmed by additional studies analyzing the extent to which shifts in public opinion align with the actual implementation of foreign policy – 67% of 222 cases matched the policy directions preferred by society, and the alignment rate for foreign policy examples was even higher, reaching 92% (Chun, 2022).

Nevertheless, there is another theory, the elite-centric theory or the Almond-Lippmann consensus, which asserts that decision-making is perceived as a top-down process.

This idea is based on the notion that society is dependent on the elite, and government decisions, including those in foreign policy, are transmitted to the public. Such actions and perspectives are founded on the belief that society is unfamiliar and unreliable; mass opinion tends to be volatile and frequently shifting, and public opinion itself has little influence on foreign policy. If there is any connection between these two aspects, it is mostly based on the executive branch's leadership and public support, as presidents have significant control over the broadcasting of information (Chun, 2022). This narrative is perhaps best understood and applied in non-democratic states, where all or most decisions are made in a top-down manner, where freedom of the press and speech is restricted, making it more difficult or even impossible for people to express their (dis) approval of foreign policy and to participate in political life (Baum, 2013). In such cases, measuring the degree of public influence can be quite challenging, but that doesn't negate its significance in general.

The proposed framework can be empirically illustrated through selected cases from Central Asia. Regional states provide a particularly relevant empirical context where governance structures often combine elements of authoritarianism with increasing societal exposure to global processes (except perhaps Turkmenistan). While decision-making is largely top-down, these societies are not isolated; they are increasingly influenced by information flows, economic openness, and regional interdependence. Kazakhstan represents a particularly illustrative example of how societal factors interact with foreign policy strategies resembling omnidirectional hedging. This interpretation is also supported by recent research on Kazakhstan's geoeconomic hedging strategy, which highlights how the country strategically engages with multiple external initiatives – such as China's Belt and Road Initiative and the European Union's Global Gateway – to diversify its partnerships, mitigate risks, and maximize strategic autonomy (Santos & Borges, 2026).

For example, in a 2022 survey conducted in Kazakhstan, respondents were asked in which direction the country's foreign policy should be oriented. The majority (73.3%) supported a continued multi-vector policy, while only 0.7% favored a pro-China direction (Kushkumbayev & Bakhtiyarova, 2024). Therefore, it can be assumed that if the ruling elite of the country suddenly decided to pursue a pro-China foreign policy, it could face public or other elite resistance, where the latter could mobilize parts of society (Akchurina, 2022). When Uzbekistan received observer state status in the Eurasian Economic Union (in 2020), this step was negatively accepted by the Uzbeks. The president had to explain himself, as he was opening the country to everybody, and it does not mean that from now on the country will work only with the Eurasian Economic Union and Russia, and Uzbekistan will seek to join the World Trade Organization (Silvan & Moshes, 2025). Moreover, in a country like Kyrgyzstan, three revolutions have already taken place – although they were primarily linked to demographic, social, economic, and domestic political factors, the geopolitical (foreign policy) aspect remains important, even if less pronounced (Ivanov, 2022). This example of Kyrgyzstan illustrates Morgan, M.C.'s (2025) words that one of the main rules of diplomacy and geopolitics is that foreign policy depends on domestic (internal) policy and that they are inseparable (Prashmantas, 2025).

On the one hand, societies are usually suppressed and alienated from power in authoritarian regime countries (Ibadildin, 2024), but when there is a mutual threat to the regime and society, a common understanding might be found (Ibadildin, 2024). As an example, the Russian-Ukrainian war is given: when it started, the Kazakh people instantly began sharing information about the war on social media, several Ukraine-supporting meetings were held, scholarships for students were announced, humanitarian aid was collected and

sent, etc. It is agreed that without political or regime support, such actions could not have been made, and this is explained by noting that Russia was perceived as a possible threat to the country (Ibadildin, 2024). This proves that society is not left outside the foreign policy.

Furthermore, shelter theory's societal dimension and its ideas that investments, people-to-people contacts, cultural and educational cooperation are useful for the vitality and development of the country and its foreign policy – especially for small ones (described in the paragraph about the social dimension above) – might also be applied to non-democratic regimes. As an example, Uzbekistan can be taken, a country whose former strong authoritarian regime was highly restrictive and posed the main issue for forming a civil society, as the country was quite closed (Hanley, 2023). The situation has started changing since 2017, when President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's administration came into power. The administration began to pursue a reform agenda, liberalizing the economy while strengthening social welfare, and announced the government's national strategy "Uzbekistan-2030" (Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the Republic of Latvia, 2025) in 2023. One of the aims of this strategy is "the development of human capital, providing for the creation of a system of education, medicine and social protection that fully meets the needs of the people and international standards" (Sharipov, 2024). To fulfill this aim spending on education increased (from 4,5% of GDP in 2017 to 7% of GDP in 2023) (Asian Development Bank, 2025), study programs were aligned with Western practices, the government seeks to increase the attractiveness of higher education for investments from abroad (Numanova, 2023), and the number of Uzbek students studying abroad increased from about 35 thousand in 2017 to more than 150 thousand in 2022 (Mitchel, 2024). Speaking further about people-to-people contacts, tourism should be mentioned as an indicator and the number of tourists counted: inbound tourism rose from 1,5 million in 2020 to 7,96 million in 2024 and outbound tourism increased from 2 million in 2020 to 6,2 million in 2024 in Uzbekistan (National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025). This openness is related to the fact that the country seeks to attract more international investments and attention from other countries, which leads to the development of the state (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025). Nevertheless, Uzbekistan continues to suffer from restrictions on freedom of speech and barriers to the legal registration of non-governmental organizations, and the majority of them are actually government-organized (Matvienko, 2021).

Considering these factors, a fourth-dimension social should be included when evaluating both the omnidirectional hedging strategy and the implementation of other strategies. This dimension could be based on shelter theory (described above) and its societal shelter principle, which argues that social isolationism and the inability to assimilate or develop new ideas and technologies can lead to the stagnation of the state and society. Countries should be interested in a certain level of cultural, economic, or educational links between their own and other societies. The model itself would appear as follows: see Table 2. The only difference depends on the regime of the country: if it is a democratic country, then it is possible to look for data on public support for the foreign and internal policy of the country; if it is a non-democratic regime, then it can be checked how the ruling regime and elites include society in the formation of foreign policy by developing the education system, allowing people-to-people contacts, etc. In this way, it allows us to measure how people participate or are involved in the development of countries' foreign policy, and it demonstrates that the country's foreign policy reflects both the ruling regime's and society's needs, justifying why this particular approach is being pursued and how it influences public life.

**Table 2.** Proposed Extension of the Dimensions and Indicators of Omnidirectional Hedging

| Dimensions | Indicators                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Diplomatic | Greater diplomatic support, joining new institutions/organizations, strategic engagement with adversary, neutrality and soft power                                                                                                                                 |
| Economic   | Free trade agreements, joining financial institutions, participation in regional economic frameworks, expanding trade partners, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)                                                                                                    |
| Security   | Joint exercises, security/defence pacts, arms trade, internal balancing                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Social     | Public support for the internal and foreign policy which is under implementation by the political regime (if it's measurable); cultural, educational, technological ideas and practices; degree of isolation and barriers between the state and the outside world. |

*Source: compiled by the authors*

The inclusion of the societal dimension does not replace the existing diplomatic, economic, and security dimensions of omnidirectional hedging. Instead, it complements them by explaining how foreign policy strategies are legitimized domestically and sustained over time. This fourth dimension would enable the omnidirectional hedging strategy to explain the foreign policy of states in a more comprehensive and precise way, and at the same time reduce, to some extent, the criticism of the (omnidirectional) hedging strategy for its lack of depth or narrowness. Moreover, the inclusion of a social dimension would ensure logical continuity with other foreign policy strategies and with shelter theory in particular, where the social dimension is one of the cornerstones. In this way, we could establish a clear chain of strategies for small and medium-sized states in their foreign policy (see picture No. 1 above), which also contributes to the ongoing debate on how small and medium states might adapt and maintain their sovereignty in a changing international system.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The changing geopolitical situation and international system in the world require scholars of international relations and foreign policy to reassess how states formulate and implement their foreign policies. Taking into account the fact that, after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, new countries and new power centers appeared, traditional approaches to foreign policy such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality remain useful for describing patterns of foreign policy behaviour, but they are often insufficient for explaining the multidimensional strategies employed by small and medium-sized states in a multipolar environment. This limitation becomes particularly evident in the context of the contemporary Post-Soviet Eurasia international order, where regional dynamics are shaped by the interaction of major powers such as Russia, China, the United States, and regional actors, creating complex environments in which small and medium-sized states must simultaneously pursue autonomy, stability, and development. This is why this article argues that shelter theory and the omnidirectional hedging strategy might serve as valuable middle strategies that explain how states with limited capabilities can navigate between dependence and autonomy. It is agreed that these strategies are still not fully developed, theoretically fulfilled (as this article demonstrates as well), and empirically tested, but their notion that the international system is not based only on

major powers and small states do not have the third choice except to align or balance with them is more than worth further analysis.

Speaking about these middle strategies of foreign policy and omnidirectional hedging, particularly, it is worth saying that both are created to explain small and middle power states' foreign policy and how they could reduce vulnerabilities, avoid entrapment and abandonment, and increase resilience. Yet they differ in their mechanism and scope. Shelter theory focuses on ensuring protection through political, economic, and societal support from stronger players or institutions and is more related to bandwagoning, while omnidirectional hedging seeks to expand diplomatic, economic, and security cooperation to maintain strategic flexibility and is more related to balancing.

The key contribution of this article lies in identifying and addressing a crucial gap between these two approaches—namely, the absence of a social dimension in omnidirectional hedging. While shelter theory explicitly incorporates societal factors, omnidirectional hedging has traditionally focused on material and strategic dimensions. This difference may be partly explained by the fact that shelter theory has primarily been applied to democratic contexts, while hedging approaches have often been used to analyze a wider variety of political systems, including non-democratic regimes.

Nevertheless, the findings of this study demonstrate that societal factors cannot be excluded from the analysis of hedging strategies. If states aim to maintain long-term stability and development, channels for societal interaction, knowledge exchange, and public legitimacy must be considered. By incorporating the social dimension into omnidirectional hedging, this article provides a more comprehensive analytical framework that links external strategic behaviour with internal societal dynamics. This extension is particularly relevant in Asian contexts, as illustrated by the cases of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy demonstrates how societal support reinforces balanced engagement between major powers, while Uzbekistan's strategy of openness shows how investment in education, mobility, and societal development strengthens diversification and external engagement. These examples suggest that omnidirectional hedging is not only a strategy of external alignment, but also a socially embedded process that depends on domestic legitimacy, institutional capacity, and openness.

From a policy perspective, the findings of this article highlight several important implications. First, foreign policy strategies that ignore societal dynamics risk losing domestic legitimacy, which may undermine their sustainability over time. Second, external actors engaging with Central Asian states, particularly in the context of China's expanding regional influence, should recognize that long-term cooperation depends not only on economic and security considerations, but also on societal acceptance and internal stability. Third, policies that promote educational exchange, cultural interaction, and openness can indirectly strengthen strategic partnerships and reduce geopolitical risks by supporting domestic resilience. Finally, the inclusion of a social dimension ensures greater theoretical coherence between shelter theory and hedging approaches, and contributes to the broader debate on how small and medium-sized states adapt to changing international environments. It also provides a more flexible and empirically applicable framework for analysing foreign policy behaviour in regions characterized by high uncertainty and complex interdependence.

Future research should empirically test the proposed model through comparative case studies, particularly across different regions of Post-Soviet Eurasia, examining how societal openness, public legitimacy, and domestic transformation influence the

implementation of hedging strategies in small and medium-sized states. Furthermore, it could investigate how small- and medium-sized states' strategies interact with the responses of larger, more powerful countries, including their willingness to support, permit, constrain, or tolerate particular strategies.

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## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

GK: writing – original draft, writing – review & editing, conceptualization, visualization;  
SK: writing – original draft, writing – review & editing, conceptualization.

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