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Russia and China struggle in Central Asia. The case of Kazakhstan

Abstract

The current international scenario, marked by the conflict in Ukraine, has triggered significant changes in the geopolitical sphere close to Russia. Russia's historical dominance in Kazakhstan, its main ally in Central Asia, is gradually being displaced by China, which has made progress in its energy and trade agreements in the region, relegating Moscow to a secondary role. The situation in Ukraine is eroding Russia's capabilities as a security guarantor in the Central Asian region, further weakening its position. Despite this, Russia retains significant influence in the region and is not willing to give up its interests in Kazakhstan, a key player on the Central Asian chessboard.

Keywords

Dominance, Oil resources, Geo-strategy, BRI, Soft power.

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I. Introduction

The current Russia-China axis is marked primarily by Russia's historic geopolitical shift eastwards, which has led to a profound confrontation with the Atlantic bloc, whose current battleground is the unfinished war in Ukraine. However, Russia's war expectations have not been fulfilled and are causing a sharp weakening in its historic zones of influence. Türkiye in the South Caucasus and China in Central Asia are taking up privileged positions that may alter Russia's status and diplomatic relations in the long run (Santiago, 2024).

The delicate geopolitical balance represents a significant challenge for China today. The radical stance of its ally, Russia, forces China to carefully consider its own moves. On the one hand, openly backing Vladimir Putin on the international stage could seriously threaten its commercial interests in Western markets. On the other hand, joining the NATO-led condemnation would leave Moscow completely isolated, meaning the loss of the only relevant ally in China's geopolitical and strategic struggle against the United States.

The Russian attack on Ukraine represents, in theory, a rejectionist stance on China's part, as it is a clear example of encouraging separatism, a problem faced by the PRC (People's Republic of China) within its own borders in regions such as Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet. This problem is one of the three evils identified in China's policy imperatives, along with extremism and terrorism, and forms part of the Chinese government's core concerns for internal security and stability.

Despite adverse circumstances, the People's Republic of China's (PRC) policy of neutrality has proved successful, managing not only to maintain a difficult balance, but also to profit from it. China has maintained its economic interests in Europe and North America, as well as its energy interests with Russia, while filling the space left by Moscow in Central Asia without coming into conflict with the Russian Federation (Argumosa, 2023).

This study will delve into the various perspectives of Russia-China relations in the Central Asia region. Today's evolving geopolitical situation invites a closer look at the broad range of approaches, in which, as will be seen below, China seems to have the best chance of prevailing.

2. Theories on the Russia-China relationship. Cooperation and competition

Looking at the different perspectives for approaching this article from the field of international relations theory, we have chosen to adopt a realist approach for two main reasons. First, the precursor of the debate on Russia-China relations, the Australian Bobo Lo, is an important exponent of neorealism. Secondly, the leaders of both

countries share a realistic vision in projecting their interests on the international stage (Ziegler, 2010).

The starting point in the study of Russia-China relations is the work of Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience*. This work has generated multiple debates that have been recognised and accepted internationally by experts in the relations between these two countries, regardless of their nationality or ideology (Lo, 2008). The analysis will focus, for obvious reasons, on the debate over opposing bilateral interests at the regional level, specifically in the Central Asian space, which Lo believes could lead to major divergences in the future. The two powers' potentially incompatible interests in the region, mainly in energy and economic relations with neighbouring countries, may create frictions that represent a major obstacle to the Beijing-Moscow partnership.

2.1. Converging interests and cooperation

The synergies and compatible cooperative interests between Russia and China are one of the few aspects on which most experts agree, as they have remained unchanged over time for obvious geopolitical reasons. These points can mainly be made concrete in two spheres: an internal one, which seeks economic development and political stability, and an external one, which aims to isolate the region from the influence of Western powers (Stronski & Ng, 2018).

Control of the region without external interference is an obvious goal for Russia and China, as this implies the absence of enemies on the chessboard, which ostensibly reduces the degree of complexity and tension by limiting the number of partners that can negotiate and cooperate without external pressure. Stability in the region, a shared goal of both countries, requires cooperation and agreements on security and military matters due to the geographical proximity to trouble spots such as Taliban extremism in Afghanistan. Both Russia (in the troubled Caucasus regions of Chechnya and Dagestan) and China (in the Uighur region of Xinjiang) fear that actions in their area of influence could penetrate their borders and destabilise national integrity. However, the two countries disagree on how to deal with these procedures.

Russia has historically opted for military efforts through the establishment of bases and counter-terrorism operations within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, while China has preferred softer approaches based on trade and investment. China concentrates its efforts on stabilising Central Asia through economic power (Stronski & Ng, 2018). In other words, it seeks influence through non-coercive measures, ruling out the use of military tools.

The presence of the PRC as a potential security guarantor complements Russia, as China prioritises protecting its investments and borders (Pardo, 2023).

2.2. Divergent interests and competition

China's entry into the region, motivated by the presence of numerous significant deposits and its geographical proximity, marked the end of Russian energy hegemony and triggered a competition for control that continues nowadays. In addition, the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project, promoted by Chinese President Xi Jinping, which seeks to connect China with European markets through Central Asia, has consolidated China's position as the main economic and trade partner and the largest investor in the region. In other words, China has positioned itself as the dominant economic and energy player in Central Asia.

Zhao Mingwen and other Chinese experts acknowledge that the construction of the gas pipeline connecting the Central Asia region to China broke Russia's historic monopoly in the region, triggering energy disputes, as will be detailed below. The subsequent development and expansion of the Central Asian producers' pipeline network to China has been inevitable, contrary to Russian interests. In this regard, Shun Wang predicts energy competitions between China and Russia in Kazakhstan (Wang, 2023). Finally, it is relevant to note that the economic elites of Central Asian countries, which have traditionally been linked to Russia and in which Moscow exercises considerable soft power through language and the media, among other tools, are increasingly attracted by the security offered by the Chinese partner, to the detriment of a Russia that is vulnerable due to the Ukrainian conflict.

It is significant, as Stronski and Ng (2018) rightly state, that it is China and not a Western country that has broken Russia's energy monopoly in Central Asia and that it is a Chinese initiative that connects Central Asia to foreign markets.

2.2.1. The Western line

Leading European and American experts agree that there is a significant asymmetry in Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia, with China emerging as the predominant actor. This assessment is based on contrasting trends and China's dominance over the most attractive aspects of the region, such as control of energy resources and trade and economic relations.

Beijing has been gradually increasing its presence in the region, while Russia has seen its sphere of influence shrink to a critical point. The war in Ukraine, as mentioned above, has weakened Russia's position as a security guarantor in the area, one of its last remaining bastions after a past of undisputed hegemony (Santiago, 2024).

According to Pardo (2023), Beijing and Moscow have established a division of labour in the region that facilitates cooperation between the two sides. China focuses on economic and investment issues, while Russia focuses on regional security. Although the author rules out a strategic conflict, he predicts an emerging rivalry due to the unequal weight of the two sides, a situation that has been growing since the conflict in Ukraine.

Along these lines, the researcher M. Hess (2023) considers that 2022 marked the beginning of the end of Russian hegemony in Central Asia, a circumstance that has been reinforced by the war in Ukraine. The author also foresees turbulence in Russia's backyard.

Finally, there is a certain group of scholars who do not fear for the health of Beijing-Moscow relations because of China's greater weight. The theories of Kaczmarek (2019) stand out among these authors, who, while acknowledging that there are sensitive issues, do not pose a danger to the health of the relationship. Another example is provided by Pantucci and Arduino (2023) who argue that Russia is no longer concerned about China's advance in the region, as it has already conceded that its secondary role in the region is a reality.

2.2.2. *The Chinese line*

The main experts consulted generally follow the mainstream analysis, characterised by a discourse that emphasises cooperative aspects with Russia rather than disagreements, using a cautious approach. This does not imply that they do not recognise and accept disagreements on certain issues, mainly in the energy field, which are at the root of tensions in the strategic partnership in Central Asia, but they consider that the strength of the relationship outweighs these obstacles.

The main point of disagreement arises with China's entry into the region as an energy partner, which allows for the diversification of energy sources. This breaks with the monopolistic practices that Russia had hitherto enjoyed, going back to Soviet times. China's energy needs represent an alternative customer for the Central Asian republics, forcing Russia to renegotiate with producer countries. The Austrian author Thomas S. Eder picks up on this first episode of competition for control of resources by analysing the Chinese literature on the subject, in which two authors stand out. According to Zhao Huasheng, "China's presence in the Central Asian energy sector is a challenge for Russia [...] China and Russia are energy partners and competitors in Central Asia" (Eder, 2013: 116-117). The expert acknowledges the harm to Russian interests due to China's entry but believes that Russia's fears are unfounded: "China, unlike the West, respects the Russian sphere of influence, not seeking any privileges, let alone regional hegemony [...] but a peaceful, stable situation, a secure neighbourhood and vital energy imports" (Eder, 2013: 118-119).

This view has hardly changed over the years and the recent conflicts. As mentioned above, China needs its Russian partner to avoid being isolated on the world stage, so it cannot afford to make mistakes or unfortunate statements that could negatively affect its neighbour or its strategic partnership with it. Russia's current vulnerability has therefore led to greater prudence and caution on China's part. As a result, moderate statements have been made by experts such as Huasheng (2023), who considers a conflict between Russia and China in a new version of the great game (Source, 2024) in Central Asia to be a Western invention, as relations between the two countries are based on mutual and

peaceful coexistence. Despite the years that have passed, the author has not altered his discourse, pointing to the West as the main discordant element.

In the same vein, former Chinese diplomat Zhao Mingwen, whose position remains confident that Sino-Russian relations are strong and have not changed significantly over time, expresses himself along the same lines. According to Mingwen, “The positive trend of deepening cooperation in all spheres of Sino-Russian relations is considered impossible to derail” (Eder, 2013: 119). Moreover, for the author, Beijing and Moscow have no boundaries and both countries would support each other in the face of conflicts originating from external powers (Hille and Lewis, 2022), which reinforces the idea of a syntony between the two revisionist powers.

2.2.3. *The Russian line*

Russian expert opinion in Central Asia in many cases indirectly acknowledges Chinese superiority and seeks cooperative approaches between the various Chinese and Russian-led organisations when it is not possible to do so independently. Where the Chinese presence prevents these organisations from developing on their own, they should cooperate with Chinese projects. In this way, they link the region's economic future to decisions taken in the BRI and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), although they also recognise the importance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Another variable on which these analysts agree is the need for mutual unity in the face of a common rival: US imperialism. Predictably, these authors highlight the synergies that are generated when Russia and China work together towards a common goal, which is none other than the stability of the young Central Asian republics, highlighting Russia's valuable and necessary presence as a guarantor of peace in the region.

On the other hand, it is important to note that the volume of Russian literature in the field of Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia has decreased considerably after the outbreak of the Moscow-Kiev conflict, which is now at the forefront of publications by Russian authors. One example of how the information vector has shifted westwards is Lukin's extensive analysis of how the Ukrainian conflict affects the Moscow-Beijing axis. The Russian expert has emphasised the strength of the pairing, omitting a comparison of their weight, highlighting Moscow's rapprochement with Beijing as a *brother in arms* in its confrontation with the West (Šraders & Terry, 2022).

3. The case of Kazakhstan

Authoritarian regimes in Central Asia are characterised by a strong concentration of power, which is a result, among other reasons, of the premature birth of these republics and the need for a cohesive element.

Kazakhstan's geographical characteristics have exerted a powerful influence on power-shaping. The extensive steppe that covers a significant part of the country, combined with desert areas and mountain ranges that serve as a natural border with China and Kyrgyzstan, has hindered the sedentary lifestyle of the nomadic populations residing in the region. Kazakhstan's social structure is characterised by the presence of clans, whose rivalry has a decisive impact on the country's internal politics.

Kazakhstan has pursued a foreign policy of multi-vector diplomacy since its independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. While this diversification strategy was vital in the early years after independence, it has evolved as the country achieved the stability necessary to protect its autonomy and negotiate relations with neighbouring great powers (Vanderhill *et al.*, 2020). Given its geographical location between Russia and China, Kazakhstan has had to make significant diplomatic efforts to maintain its independence.

The Central Asian country has traditionally maintained good relations with Russia, although this dynamic has changed significantly in recent times. At the same time, Kazakhstan has strongly defended its sovereignty and sought to maintain an independent foreign policy. However, the gradual rise of China as a key player in the region has generated remarkable synergies, taking advantage of the economic opportunities that the Asian giant offers.

Kazakhstan's stability has historically been a magnet for foreign investment, especially due to its considerable energy reserves, which have positioned it as one of the most important economic players in the region. This strategy of multilateralism has allowed it to reconcile the influences of Russia and China with investments from the US and the EU, striking a delicate balance that is essential for its survival. Moreover, Kazakhstan has been respected and regarded by other Central Asian countries as an independent regional power not subservient to foreign interests.

In terms of its political structure, Kazakhstan is characterised by a strong neo-patrimonialism that influences decision-making (Ballesteros, 2022). Moreover, it is a clear example of a rentier state, where the economy has been subordinated to political interests. Substantial revenues from the export of hydrocarbons, natural gas and uranium have helped maintain and perpetuate kleptocracy and nepotism, with the Nazarbayev family and a group of oligarchs close to the regime at the centre of power.

While initially President Nursultan Nazarbayev may have shown some disposition towards democratic openness, over time the regime has become increasingly authoritarian. Significant legislative changes have expanded the president's power and hindered the participation of opposition parties, which have been delegitimised and persecuted.

As a result, the electoral system has been conditioned, limiting the presence of independent political parties and favouring those affiliated to the president. Revenues from hydrocarbon exports have been instrumental in sustaining the country's economy and enriching the ruling elites, while the population has experienced a gradual decline in individual freedoms, as well as a deterioration in working and living conditions.

3.1. Current context

The current political situation in Kazakhstan is marked by the uncertainty inherent in a change of presidency, especially when the predecessor has served a long term in office. This was the case with President Nazarbayev, who led the country from the Soviet era until 2019, making him one of the longest-serving leaders in Central Asia. After an election with few elements of transparency, the winner of the elections was Kasim-Jomart Tokayev. Although continuity in his mandate was expected, several unexpected events have led to significant changes in the country's government, with repercussions for its foreign policy.

The most prominent event, with decisive consequences, was the mass protest in early 2022 by a significant part of the population in Zhanaozen against the increase in the price of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), commonly used as a fuel in Central Asia. This protest, which quickly spread across the country, highlighted deeper social problems, from the precarious economic situation affecting much of the country, with income levels barely above the subsistence threshold, to repressive policies, such as the lack of freedoms and corruption, as well as energy problems, such as the interruption of electricity supply in the easternmost regions (Gil, 2023).

Faced with his first significant challenge as president, Tokayev did not hesitate to seek external support from Russia through the CSTO, arguing that the protests were the result of foreign influence and accusing the demonstrators of terrorism, thus evoking pro-Western colour revolutions. The crackdown on the demonstrations resulted in the loss of hundreds of lives and significant purges in the government, affecting important figures linked to Nazarbayev, including the former president himself, who was removed from Kazakhstan's Security Council.

Many experts point out that Tokayev handled these protests skilfully, blaming his predecessor for the social unrest and revoking the lifetime positions he held. In this way, it has justified a profound change in political leadership, all in a context marked by Russian backing and intervention, leaving Nazarbayev with no room for manoeuvre (Stronski, 2023).

In contrast, other authors accept a significant change in the political elite but doubt this immediacy. They argue that this transformation will be gradual, as, among other reasons, the old oligarchic elites still retain certain segments of power, although these show evidence of attrition (Kudaibergenova & Laruelle, 2022).

The paradigm shift in Kazakh politics, where Tokayev has emerged as a central figure, has marked a new era in the nation. Not only it is evident in the change of the capital's name to Nursultan, but it has also brought with it a transformation in the international perception of the country, which is now rocked by protests and risks losing foreign investment and trade agreements.

This momentous change in Kazakh politics raises many questions. The purge and renewal in institutions once loyal to his predecessor, Nazarbayev, and now under

Tokayev's control, threatens the oligarchs who benefited from the former president's protection. This corrupt oligarchy, which includes the former president's daughters and sons-in-law, is now in the spotlight. The fundamental question is whether these changes will be structural, involving less restrictive measures and greater democratic openness that will benefit society, or whether they will simply be limited to a superficial change of elites, with renewed loyalty to Tokayev.

3.2. Russia, the soft power

3.2.1. Moscow, from historically to uncertainty

From the Russian perspective, influenced by Putin's particular vision and the development of Duguin's theories, the role of the shared past and Kazakhstan's current subordination to Moscow is emphasised. There are disagreements between Russia and Kazakhstan over the concept of Eurasian identity attributed to the latter. Russian theories, aligned with the country's interests, argue that the emergence of the Kazakh state is due to the eponymous socialist republic in the Soviet era, from which the Central Asian states are derived, with the Russian Federation as their natural successor. On the other hand, the Kazakh perspective locates its roots in the pre-USSR Turkic Khanate, thus distancing itself from Russian narratives and acknowledging ethnic diversity and the development of its civilisation within Eurasia. Furthermore, it is noted that while there were unilateral interactions during the Soviet period, the history before and after this period has been on separate tracks. Kazakhstan upholds the notion of an independent history both within and beyond its borders (Vanderhill *et al.*, 2020).

Subsequent developments have been unfavourable to Moscow's interests. Kazakhstan, Russia's main ally and the gateway to the Central Asian courtyard, is also the country with the largest Russian population (given the demographic characteristics of the region, the geographical factor in Central Asian countries is crucial) and the only Central Asian republic that is part of all relevant Russian institutions in the international arena. Strong cultural, geographic ties and both economic and energy objectives represent Russia's main interests in the country. Relations previously characterised by understanding between Putin and Nazarbayev have now cooled with the arrival of Tokayev. Multiple analysts suggest that this may be due to the closeness between Putin and the former president's elites, while others point out that the newcomer has interpreted the invasion of Ukraine as a sign of imperialist anxieties that could affect more countries in the Soviet sphere, a circumstance that will be analysed below. Despite immediate Russian backing during the Zhanaozen protests, most analysts anticipated a clear continuity in Kazakhstan's foreign policy, where Moscow plays a prominent role. However, Tokayev surprised everyone in June of the same year by stating during a visit to Saint Petersburg that just as he does not recognise the pro-Russian separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, he would maintain

the same position should Lugansk and Donetsk (pro-Russian provinces in Ukraine's disputed far east) be granted similar status.

These strong statements have not been isolated incidents. Soon after, Tokayev implemented an open-door policy to allow all Russians who had been called up to serve in the war in Ukraine to enter the country. In addition to these open criticisms of the Russian initiated war, the latest developments in this series of disagreements with Moscow include the new abstention on international demands for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine during the UN vote in early 2023. At the end of the same year, Tokayev used the Kazakh language instead of Russian (the latter being coofficial in Kazakhstan) during Putin's official visit to the country.

Russia's response was swift. Kazakhstan, which relies on Russian infrastructure to export its energy resources to Europe, has experienced supply cuts on Russian territory. In response, the Tokayev government has intensified its contacts with the West and China to counter the Russian blockade. As a result, there has been an increase in the volume of the Trans-Caspian Canal, using Azerbaijan as a route to connect to the BTC (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan) and reach European markets. In addition, China is increasing its share as Kazakhstan's main oil customer, which represents a victory for Kazakhstan in the Russian pressure game (Hess, 2023).

As regards intra-EEAU cooperation, Russia's occupation of Crimea generated new disagreement. Moscow tried unsuccessfully to pressure other members to support Russian measures in the context of the annexation. As for the Russian-led common security partnership, the CSTO, Kazakhstan has once again shown defiance by conducting military exercises with NATO and refusing to purchase Russian weaponry (Vanderhill *et al.*, 2020).

Kazakhstan's role is crucial in the Kremlin's policy landscape, where more subtle and less coercive approaches will be required to engage its southern neighbour and regain lost influence. The crisis in relations not only represents a significant challenge for Russia because of the loss of a vital ally, increasingly close to China, but also because Kazakhstan is the main gateway to the rest of the Central Asian republics.

3.2.2. Russian minorities and the invasion of Ukraine

The high presence of the Russian population in Kazakhstan can be traced back to historical and geographical reasons. On the one hand, during the Soviet era, repopulation policies were implemented (in many cases, forced) towards geographically disadvantaged regions, such as Siberia or Kazakhstan. Proximity to the neighbouring country also encouraged emigration, making Kazakhstan the country with the largest number of Russian citizens in the entire Central Asian region. In many cases, the Russian population outnumbered the Kazakh population, mainly concentrated in the north of the country.

Nationalist discourses in the early years of independence sought to establish a common sense of identity in order to cohere an artificially created state, which could have led to ethnic tensions between Kazakhs and Russians. However, Nazarbayev's skill achieved a conciliation that was not easy in his social policies, achieving a peaceful ethnic balance. Kazakhs were promoted to senior positions in the public sector (which, since Soviet times, had been mostly occupied by Slavs), while the principle of non-discrimination was upheld and "incitement to inter-ethnic discord" was strictly prohibited (Bohr *et al.*, 2019).

The relaxed atmosphere achieved by the president, which mitigated the risks of secession in the north of the country and promoted peaceful coexistence between two distinct ethnic groups, was disrupted in 2014 with Russia's annexation of Crimea. Similarities in relations with Russia, between Ukraine and Kazakhstan have raised alarm bells in Astana, a situation that has intensified following Russia's invasion in early 2022. This has generated a common fear among the different ethnic groups. On the one hand, the Kazakhs fear that the Russians will act as infiltrators, similar to what happened in pro-Russian villages in eastern Ukraine. On the other hand, Kazakh Russians fear social persecution in response to Moscow's actions in Ukraine (Bohr *et al.*, 2019).

Further along this line of thought, we find reasoning that justifies Kazakh fear in defence and protection of state sovereignty to avoid becoming a client state of any of the great powers, but especially of Russia, given its historical role as a colonial power in the region (Vanderhill *et al.*, 2020). The best example in this context of the Ukrainian conflict as a scenario of national infringement in favour of another regional power is Lukashenko's Belarus, which has become yet another instrument of Russia in the Ukrainian war. Kazakhstan does not want to become another Belarus.

Despite the notable presence of a russophile population in northern Kazakhstan, which could raise similar concerns to those in Ukraine's eastern provinces, a similar conflict is unlikely to arise in the short term. Unlike the conflict in Ukraine, the Kremlin has not supported any secessionist aspirations of Kazakh Russians in the north of the country. Moreover, Russia's fragility because of the protracted conflict with Kiev would rule out the idea of opening new fronts. Tokayev's moves therefore seem to respond more to a desire to eliminate any vestige of his predecessor's policies.

3.2.3. Soft power

A large group of experts now argue that the Russian threat in Kazakhstan comes not primarily from Russian minorities, but from the influence of Russian soft power. This concept, now developed by several authors based on Nye's work, involves the subtle, often difficult to identify, meddling of elements by a foreign actor that influence and modify a country's policies to its advantage. This infiltration, as Nye (2005) argues, "predisposes people to accept their leadership, as they share their vision and values, and are therefore more likely to support policies that support these assumptions".

The application of such tools is currently proving successful, as it does not require the use of violence and often goes unnoticed socially. China is a prime example of the use of these economic and investment practices to exert control in its area of influence. Military experts support the idea that Russia has the capacity to overthrow regimes that are adverse to Moscow and replace them with regimes more sympathetic to its interests. The Kremlin wields this soft power through its cultural and ideological influence, using mainly five instruments to alter and condition Kazakhstan's political guidelines in its favour. These instruments include cooperative approaches, public diplomacy, the Russian language, education and the media (Hudson, 2022).

Cooperative approaches benefit from a number of common characteristics, such as values or culture, which are mainly a result of the russification of the country during the Soviet era and which are still present in Kazakh society today, the most influenced by Russian culture of all the former Central Asian republics. Kazakh diplomacy, as mentioned above, is based on a strategy of diversification that allows it to establish multiple links but requires significant efforts to achieve a balance that does not generate tensions. Russia has traditionally been the main axis or one of the main variables on which Kazakhstan's foreign policy is developed.

As for the Russian language, it has been an important asset in the past but is now in decline. This decline is explained by the population growth of Kazakhs, influenced by a significant exodus of ethnic Russian Kazakhs since the war in Ukraine. This is reflected in statistical results, especially in the field of education, where a reduction in the number of schools teaching in Russian in Kazakhstan has been observed, decreasing from 32 % in 2008 to 17 % in 2020. In addition, there has been a drop in the percentage of students studying entirely in Russian, from 36 % to 12 % over the same period (Hudson, 2022).

As for university education, despite the decline of Russian in schools, the situation is different. Russia remains the preferred destination for Kazakh students abroad, and the number of them choosing to study in Russia has increased since 2005 (Hudson, 2022). The reasons behind this trend are easily understandable, including geographical, linguistic and economic factors.

Finally, we find the role of the media, one of the main forms of soft power in the era of globalisation of communications, facilitated by the use of the internet as the network of networks. In addition, the presence of Russian TV channels and radio stations in Kazakhstan is widespread.

But how do the consequences of this soft power manifest themselves? According to the author, soft power that promotes a positive image of Russia within Kazakhstan is projected in the international arena, contributing to the achievement of Russian economic, political and security goals. A clear example is the international cooperation between the two countries, evidenced by Kazakhstan's participation in all Russian-run bodies at the international level. This strong link justifies and normalises the intervention of Russian troops in support of the president during the January protests as a result of soft power. Without this phenomenon, criticism from nationalist or pro-Western Kazakhs of the

entry of CSTO forces would have been more noticeable. However, Tokayev is using various means to reduce this Russian influence in virtually all areas of soft power.

The main responses have been in the cultural sphere, with multiple events highlighting the country's own history, disassociating itself from the link with Russia. Other significant and less subtle manifestations include the switch to the Latin alphabet, scheduled prior to the current crisis, and the limitation of Russian propaganda through the Kazakh media, as open criticism of Western countries created uncomfortable situations for partners within Kazakhstan's multi-vectoral political character. Finally, to reduce the importance of the Russian language, the study of a third language, English, was introduced as an international showcase (Bohr *et al.*, 2019). The last incident mentioned was the language episode at one of the last meetings between the leaders of the two countries, suggesting that the situation is closer to a continuation of tensions and rivalry than an easing. For these reasons, Kazakhstan is justified as the best scenario to exemplify Russian soft power.

3.3. *China, the emerging partner*

3.3.1. *Chinese interests in Kazakhstan*

Kazakhstan plays a crucial role in Chinese projects. Its privileged geographical location, sharing a border with China and serving as the main route to European markets, is combined with its vast natural resources. As Pieper (2021) notes, "Kazakhstan did not need to lobby for the use of any particular branch. Geography and logistics play in Kazakhstan's favour because of the country's central location in the heart of Eurasia".

According to Kazakh authorities, in 2021, Kazakhstan's exports to China will reach an all-time high of 147 million tonnes of oil and 44 billion m³ of gas. Crude oil and its derivatives ranked first in terms of value, reaching \$4.1 billion, followed by natural gas, with a value of \$1.2 billion. In this context, CNPC (China National Petroleum Corporation) stands out as one of the main foreign investors (Nurdavletova *et al.*, 2023).

Kazakhstan plays a leading role in the energy sphere with China, being one of its main partners due to its abundance of natural resources. The current geopolitical trend is strengthening ties between the two countries, at the expense of Russia. Kazakhstan has emerged as a regular participant in multilateral forums and meetings, as well as in bilateral negotiations in the energy sphere, which some authors have called energy diplomacy (Nurdavletova *et al.*, 2023). Energy relations between China and Kazakhstan date back to the late 1990s, when the first energy agreements were signed.

However, it is from 2013, with the introduction of the BRI, that China's presence in Kazakhstan experienced a significant and definitive increase. This progress is materialised through a broad and generous network of economic and commercial investments, with energy cooperation being one of the key pillars of the project,

according to Professor Shun Wang (2023). Cooperation between the two countries has been strengthened since the beginning of the new millennium and has reached a decisive level with the monumental BRI project, which involves Chinese state-owned enterprises, such as the mentioned CNPC.

Table I presents updated official Kazakh government statistics, revealing that the country's economic engine is the country's large exports of natural resources, mainly oil and oil products, which account for more than half of the total monetary value, amounting to 53.8 %, far ahead of other raw materials such as radioactive chemical elements (4.4 %) and refined copper (4.1 %).

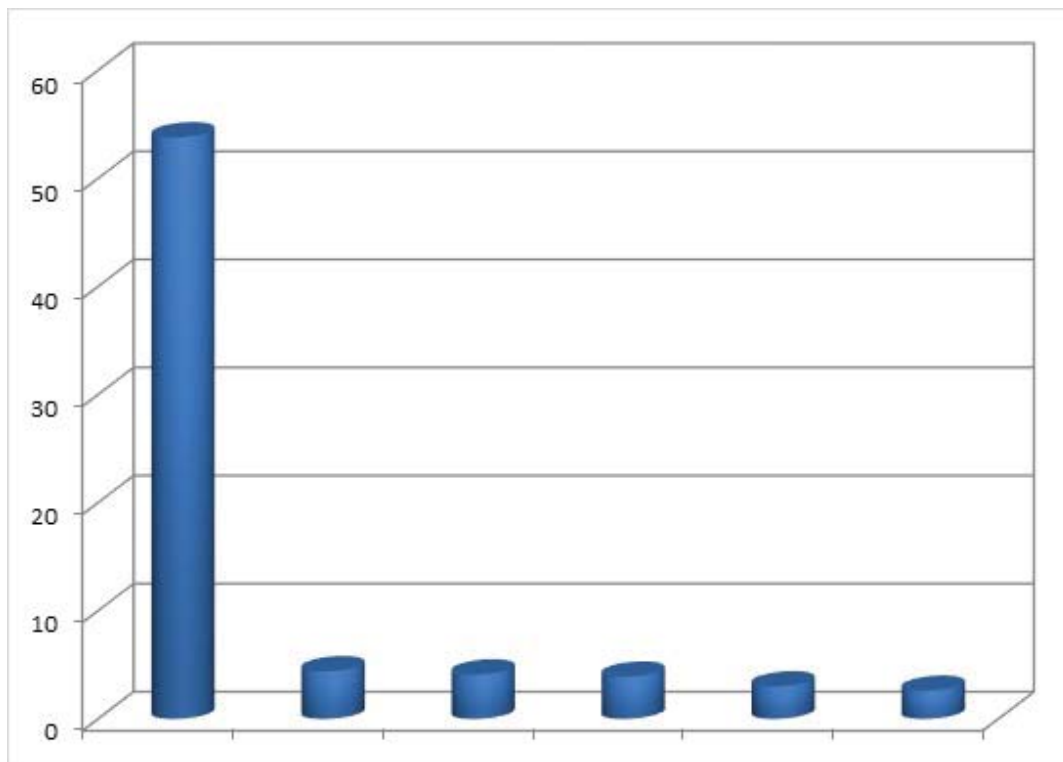


Table I. Kazakhstan's exports in 2023 by product (in %). Source: Author's elaboration based on data obtained from the National Statistical Office of Kazakhstan. Available at: <https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/economy/foreign-market/publications/123067/>

Table II shows the geographically segmented trade balance. Total exports in 2023 reached 78 674.5 million US dollars (USD). In terms of ranking by trading partner, it can be seen in Kazakh imports (Table II) that China (18.7 %) is slightly surpassed by Italy (18.9 %). It is followed by Russia (12.4 %) and the Netherlands (5.2 %). On the other hand, in terms of exports (Table III), as was to be expected from the above, China is the main destination for Kazakh resources, representing 27.4 % of total exports, closely followed by Russia (26.5 %), whose trend, with the conflict in Ukraine in the background, is difficult to foresee.

Not surprisingly, Kazakhstan is the Central Asian country that receives the most attention and investment from China. In addition to the energy interests mentioned above, there are also important Chinese economic, commercial and security objectives in Kazakhstan.

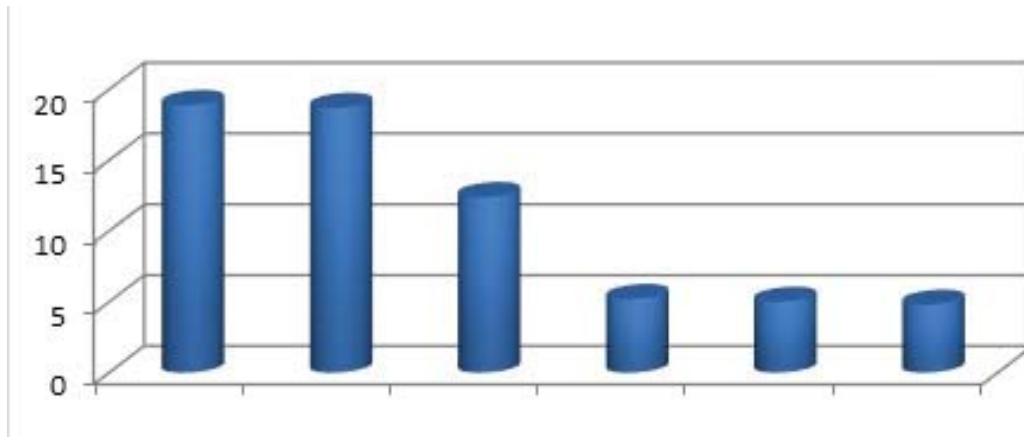


Table II. Kazakhstan's imports in 2023 by country (in %). Source: Author's elaboration based on data obtained from the National Statistical Office of Kazakhstan. Available at: <https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/economy/foreign-market/publications/123067/>

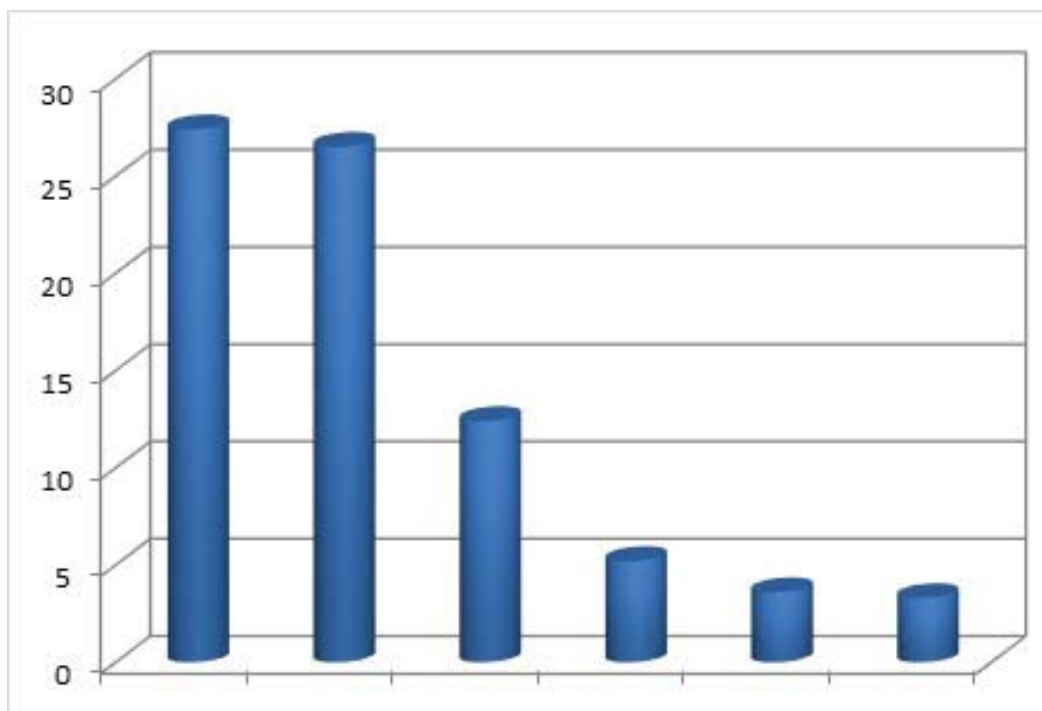


Tabla III. Exportaciones de Kazajistán en 2023 por países (en porcentaje). Fuente: Elaboración propia. A partir de datos obtenidos a través del Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas de Kazajistán. Disponible en: <https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/economy/foreign-market/publications/123067/>

These interests are closely linked to the success of the Belt and Road Initiative, which has involved considerable investment for the benefit of the Central Asian country to create and modernise non-existent or old infrastructure inherited from the Soviet era.

Recently, the partnership between the two states has evolved into a comprehensive strategic partnership, further consolidating relations. However, there are dissenting voices within the country itself, perhaps influenced by a latent Sinophobia, who estimate a decline in Chinese investment and minimise Beijing's role in the Kazakh economy. This feeling of rejection is mainly due to two reasons: the growing Chinese presence in the country's economy and the ethnic problems on the border resulting from the persecution of the Uighur minority.

4. Conclusions

In the current context, the prospective outline of Kazakhstan's foreign policy in the coming years becomes complex. The multi-vector strategy, the bedrock of Kazakh diplomatic success, will continue to be a key pillar, delineated by relations with its Chinese and Russian neighbours. The challenges faced with each one, and the decisions and actions taken, have a decisive impact on the direction of this vector, not only in Kazakhstan but in the entire Central Asian sphere.

The cooling of relations between Tokayev and Putin introduces unprecedented uncertainty into bilateral relations, a situation that China is taking advantage of. Kazakhstan observes, with justified suspicion, Russia's moves in Ukraine, seeking some distancing in order to safeguard its autonomy and avoid being subjugated as Belarus is experiencing under Lukashenko's regime. However, this stance faces obstacles, as Russia has significant resources to influence its neighbour. Russian interference in Kazakhstan's political life through electronic media creates instability and serves its interests. The outcome of the war in Ukraine will condition the extent of Russian soft power in the country and thus in the Central Asian region.

China positions itself as Kazakhstan's priority partner, with which it shares a strategic partnership of multilateral scope. This cooperation goes beyond energy agreements, representing a crucial factor in the delicate balance of power in the region, especially in the face of recent tensions between Kazakhstan and Russia. Relations between the two countries will largely depend on the success or failure of the Belt and Road Initiative projects as they pass through Kazakhstan. However, incidents involving the Kazakh minority on Chinese territory are generating a sense of rejection, exacerbating what the Kazakh population calls a yellow invasion. Reversing this mentality requires a reversal of domestic policies in the Xinjiang region, as well as investments that benefit both Chinese interests and Kazakh citizens.

In sum, there is reasonable evidence of competitive tensions and disputes between Russia and China in Central Asia, especially over the control of energy resources, where Kazakhstan plays a major role as the main producer. While Moscow and Beijing are unlikely to publicly highlight their differences, disputes could intensify in future scenarios if significant changes in the world order occur. However, such assumptions are unlikely in the short to medium term.

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