



ECONOMIC BANDWAGONING AND STRATEGIC HEDGING : KAZAKHSTAN'S RESPONSE TO CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

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Abstract

This article examines Kazakhstan's response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since 2013. It argues that this response is best understood as a domain-specific combination of economic bandwagoning and strategic hedging. Kazakhstan has pursued Chinese markets, capital and connectivity in trade, industrial cooperation and transport while maintaining instruments of strategic insurance in institutional, infrastructural, security and regulatory domains. The study adopts a single-case design with a convergent mixed-methods logic, combining official indicators of trade, investment and rail transit with a thematic analysis of policy documents, institutional agreements and public controversies. The findings show that deep, state-supported engagement with China coexists with substantial trade and investment relations with other partners, participation in Russian-led institutions, investment in the Trans-Caspian route, and restrictions on foreign access to agricultural land. The article contributes to the literature on hedging by showing that bandwagoning and strategic insurance can be distributed unevenly across policy domains. It therefore qualifies the assumption that participation in the BRI necessarily entails comprehensive political alignment with China.

Keywords: Kazakhstan; Belt and Road Initiative; bandwagoning; hedging; Central Asia; China; multi-vector foreign policy

1. Introduction

When Xi Jinping unveiled the Silk Road Economic Belt at Nazarbayev University in Astana in September 2013, Kazakhstan was already in a strategically important position within China's emerging vision of Eurasian connectivity. As the world's largest landlocked country, Kazakhstan shares a long border with China and sits between China, Russia, the Caspian region and Europe. Its territory is therefore important not only as a transit corridor, but also as an economic space in its own right. Over the following decade, Kazakhstan became one of the most prominent partners of what is now known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It welcomed Chinese investment in energy, transport, logistics and industry while linking its own infrastructure programme, Nurly Zhol, to the initiative (Kassenova, 2017).

This growing engagement with China has taken place alongside a long-standing effort to preserve Kazakhstan's room for manoeuvre in foreign policy. Since independence, Kazakh leaders have pursued a multi-vector approach, seeking constructive relations with Russia, China, Western countries and other partners rather than becoming overly dependent on any single power (Vanderhill et al., 2020). These two orientations are not necessarily incompatible, but they do create a clear policy tension. China's rise offers Kazakhstan access to investment, markets and new channels of connectivity. At the same time, closer integration with a much larger neighbour can raise concerns about economic dependence, control over strategic assets



and domestic political legitimacy. The protests surrounding proposed land reforms in 2016 illustrated how concerns about foreign involvement and land ownership could become politically sensitive. This leads to the central question of the study: how can Kazakhstan deepen its economic relationship with a rising China while preserving its strategic autonomy?

The existing literature provides several, sometimes competing, ways of understanding this relationship. One strand emphasises the opportunities created by Chinese capital and the asymmetric dependencies that may develop alongside them (Rolland, 2017). Another focuses on the agency of Central Asian states and their ability to maintain relationships with several external powers rather than choosing one exclusive alignment (Cooley, 2012; Vanderhill et al., 2020). More recent research on Kazakhstan comes closer to the specific issue examined here. Tjia (2022) shows how Chinese connectivity initiatives can increase Kazakhstan's leverage and create opportunities for economic diversification. Panibratov et al. (2025) argue that the country's transition from a landlocked to a land-linked economy can strengthen its bargaining position. More recently, Botelho dos Santos and Borges (2026) describe Kazakhstan's approach as a form of geoeconomic hedging, through which the country seeks to benefit from both the BRI and the European Global Gateway while managing the risks associated with dependence. These contributions are important, but they do not fully explain how Kazakhstan combines economic accommodation with strategic protection across different policy areas. In particular, less attention has been given to whether the balance between these two behaviours varies across trade, transport, energy routes, security and domestic regulation. This is the gap addressed by the present study. Rather than asking simply whether Kazakhstan is aligned with China, the article examines where Kazakhstan accommodates Chinese interests, where it seeks insurance against dependence, and how the two approaches operate alongside each other.

The study addresses two questions. First, to what extent has Kazakhstan aligned economically with China under the BRI? Second, which instruments has it used to mitigate the strategic consequences of that alignment, and in which domains? To answer these questions, the analysis brings together two related concepts. Bandwagoning traditionally refers to alignment with a stronger power rather than resistance to it (Walt, 1987). Schweller's (1994) concept of bandwagoning for profit extends this idea by showing that states may align with stronger powers because they expect material gains. Strategic hedging, by contrast, describes a strategy in which a state seeks the benefits of cooperation with a rising power while also developing forms of insurance against the risks of dependence (Kuik, 2008, 2016).

These concepts should not be treated as mutually exclusive. Kuik's work already recognises limited bandwagoning as one possible component of hedging. The contribution of this study therefore does not lie in placing the two concepts on opposite sides of a theoretical divide. Instead, it lies in examining how accommodation and insurance are distributed across policy domains. In Kazakhstan's case, economic engagement with China may be particularly strong in some areas, while efforts to preserve alternatives and reduce exposure may be more visible in others. This domain-specific perspective makes it possible to move beyond the simple question of whether Kazakhstan is "bandwagoning" or "hedging" and to examine how the two behaviours interact in practice.

The central argument is that Kazakhstan's response to the BRI represents a differentiated combination of economic bandwagoning and strategic hedging. Economic bandwagoning is particularly visible in trade, industrial cooperation and transport, where cooperation with China



provides access to markets, investment and connectivity. At the same time, Kazakhstan maintains forms of strategic insurance through institutional diversification, alternative infrastructure and transport routes, security relationships and domestic regulatory measures. These two behaviours serve complementary purposes: economic engagement allows Kazakhstan to capture some of the opportunities associated with China's rise, while hedging helps reduce the strategic and domestic risks that may accompany deeper dependence.

The study uses a single-case design with embedded units of analysis and a convergent mixed-methods logic. It combines quantitative indicators of trade, investment and transport with a qualitative examination of policy documents, institutional arrangements and public controversies. This approach makes it possible to assess both the depth of Kazakhstan's economic engagement with China and the mechanisms through which the country seeks to preserve strategic room for manoeuvre. The next section develops the theoretical framework and presents the hypotheses. The third section explains the research design, data and limits of inference. The fourth and fifth sections examine economic bandwagoning and strategic hedging, respectively. The sixth considers how the two behaviours interact, while the final section discusses the broader implications and concludes the article.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Bandwagoning, balancing and the economic turn

Bandwagoning first appeared in international relations theory as the opposite of balancing. In Waltz's (1979) structural theory, balancing is generally expected when power becomes concentrated, which makes bandwagoning a behaviour that requires further explanation. Walt (1987) refined this argument by showing that states respond not simply to power, but to perceived threats. Weaker states are more likely to bandwagon when potential allies are unavailable and when the threatening power is both close and capable of causing harm. Schweller (1994), however, broadened this security-centred interpretation. States may also align with stronger powers because they expect to gain from doing so. From this perspective, bandwagoning can reflect an effort to obtain material benefits rather than simply an attempt to avoid danger.

Although the concept was initially developed to explain security alignments, its underlying logic can also be applied to economic relations. Kang (2007), for example, shows that some East Asian states accommodated China's growing power rather than attempting to balance against it, partly because this approach offered economic benefits and greater regional stability. Building on this insight, this article understands economic bandwagoning as a deliberate increase in a state's economic engagement with a stronger power in order to capture material and developmental benefits, even when the relationship involves some degree of asymmetry. Three dimensions are particularly relevant here. The first is trade orientation, reflected in a sustained and substantial share of economic exchange with the stronger power. The second is capital and infrastructure alignment, which refers to the incorporation of the partner's investment, financing and infrastructure into sectors considered strategically or economically important. The third is policy alignment, meaning that national development programmes are adjusted or connected to initiatives promoted by the stronger partner.

Economic bandwagoning should nevertheless be distinguished from structural dependence. Hirschman (1945) demonstrated that asymmetric trade can generate political influence because the smaller partner usually faces greater costs if economic relations are disrupted. Keohane and



Nye (1977) later distinguished between sensitivity and vulnerability in situations of asymmetric interdependence. These perspectives help explain how economic ties can create dependence, but they do not by themselves tell us whether closer relations were actively chosen or largely imposed by circumstances. This is where the concept of bandwagoning adds an important element: agency. When a state actively seeks closer economic relations and presents them as serving its own development objectives, the resulting pattern can be understood as chosen alignment, even when it also creates asymmetries or new vulnerabilities.

2.2 Hedging as a hybrid strategy

The concept of hedging emerged largely from research on Southeast Asian states dealing with the uncertainty created by China's rise. Kuik (2008) defines hedging as a form of insurance-seeking behaviour under conditions of uncertainty and high stakes. Rather than committing completely to one side, a state can pursue the benefits of cooperation while simultaneously preparing for less favourable outcomes. Economic cooperation and diplomatic accommodation therefore operate alongside measures designed to reduce exposure to future risks. In his later work, Kuik (2016) develops this framework by identifying several behavioural components of hedging, including economic pragmatism, binding engagement, limited bandwagoning, dominance denial and indirect balancing.

The concept, however, requires careful use. Koga (2018), drawing on Japan's experience, shows that economic cooperation with China combined with a strong security relationship with the United States may represent balancing rather than hedging. What matters, therefore, is not simply that a state maintains relationships with several powers, but what exactly it is trying to insure against and which instruments it uses to do so.

Two implications are important for this study. First, hedging can include limited bandwagoning. Economic engagement with China is therefore not necessarily evidence against hedging when the state simultaneously preserves alternative partnerships and options. Second, the concept should not become so broad that every form of ambiguous foreign policy behaviour is labelled hedging. Ciorciari and Haacke (2019) make precisely this point, noting that the concept has sometimes been applied so widely that its analytical value becomes difficult to sustain. To avoid this problem, the present study treats hedging as an observable pattern of behaviour and looks for concrete forms of insurance, including diversified partnerships, alternative transport routes, institutional memberships, security arrangements and domestic regulatory controls.

This distinction also helps separate hedging from Kazakhstan's broader policy of multi-vectorism. Multi-vectorism describes a foreign-policy doctrine through which Kazakhstan seeks to maintain relations with several major powers (Vanderhill et al., 2020). Hedging, by contrast, is used here as an analytical category. It allows us to examine how that broader doctrine is translated into specific mechanisms that combine engagement with insurance. This distinction makes it possible to move beyond simply observing that Kazakhstan maintains several external relationships and instead ask how those relationships function strategically.

2.3 Analytical framework and hypotheses

Kazakhstan provides a particularly useful case for examining these dynamics. It is a regional middle power, but it is considerably smaller than both China and Russia. It is also landlocked and depends heavily on external markets, investment and transit networks. At the same time, its hydrocarbon and mineral resources give it assets that can be exchanged for capital,



technology and market access. Kazakhstan therefore faces a rising economic power whose initiatives can address some of its connectivity and development needs, while Russia remains an important economic, institutional and security partner. The BRI puts this multi-vector approach under direct pressure: it creates significant opportunities, but it can also raise concerns about sovereignty, dependence and domestic legitimacy. The analysis begins in 2013 because this was the year the initiative was announced in Astana.

Three hypotheses guide the empirical analysis.

H1 (economic bandwagoning) holds that, since 2013, Kazakhstan has maintained and deepened its economic engagement with China in trade, industrial cooperation and transport, while connecting national development programmes to the BRI.

H2 (strategic hedging) holds that Kazakhstan has simultaneously maintained or developed instruments of insurance, including partner diversification, alternative transport routes, institutional memberships and domestic regulatory controls.

H3 (domain specificity) holds that bandwagoning is more visible in economic and infrastructure domains, whereas hedging is more pronounced in institutional, security, diplomatic and regulatory domains.

These hypotheses are deliberately open to disconfirmation. H1 would be weakened if China's share and volume of economic relations with Kazakhstan remained stagnant and if national programmes showed little meaningful connection with the BRI. H2 would be weakened if alternative partnerships and routes were absent, merely rhetorical or unrelated to Kazakhstan's exposure to China. H3 would be weakened if insurance mechanisms were equally prominent in trade and transport as they are in security and regulation, or if accommodation were equally strong in security as it is in economic relations.

Domestic politics is also part of this framework. Public concerns about land, foreign investment and Chinese influence have periodically placed limits on government policy (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2012; Peyrouse, 2016). Putnam's (1988) two-level framework is useful in this respect because domestic political constraints can narrow the concessions available to a government. At the same time, these constraints may strengthen its bargaining position by signalling clear limits to external partners. The central empirical question, therefore, is not whether Kazakhstan should be labelled simply a bandwagoner or a hedger. It is where, how and to what extent each behaviour becomes visible across different policy domains.

3. Research design, data and methods

3.1 Design

This study uses a single-case embedded design (Yin, 2018) combined with a convergent mixed-methods logic (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Kazakhstan is a particularly useful case because it combines substantial economic exposure to China with a long-standing multi-vector foreign policy. It is also the country where the Silk Road Economic Belt was announced in 2013, making it a natural starting point for examining Kazakhstan's response to the BRI.

The analysis is organised around several embedded policy domains: trade, investment and finance, transport and connectivity, energy routes, security, diplomacy and domestic regulation. The study covers the period from 2013 to the most recent data available. Earlier developments are considered where they help establish the historical context or clarify changes that occurred after 2013.



The quantitative and qualitative components are first examined separately and then brought together. The purpose is not to force the two types of evidence into a single measure, but to determine whether they point towards a similar interpretation of Kazakhstan's behaviour. Table 1 summarises how the three hypotheses are operationalised.

Table 1. Operationalisation of the hypotheses

<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Indicators and evidence</i>	<i>Expected pattern</i>
<i>H1: Economic bandwagoning</i>	Trade, investment, infrastructure and policy alignment	China's share and composition of Kazakhstan's trade; Chinese investment and project portfolios; rail and transit volumes; links between Nurly Zhol and the BRI	Sustained and state-supported economic engagement with China
<i>H2: Strategic hedging</i>	Diversification and insurance	Relative weight of Russia, the EU and other partners; alternative transport routes; EAEU and EU ties; domestic regulatory measures	Maintenance of alternatives that reduce exposure to China
<i>H3: Domain specificity</i>	Cross-domain comparison	Economic indicators compared with security, institutional, diplomatic and regulatory evidence	Stronger bandwagoning in economic domains and stronger hedging in other strategic domains

3.2 Quantitative and documentary evidence

The quantitative component relies primarily on descriptive indicators from official and international sources. Trade data include China's share of Kazakh exports and imports, the corresponding shares of other major partners, and the composition of bilateral trade. These figures are drawn mainly from the Bureau of National Statistics and UN Comtrade. Investment evidence focuses on China's position among foreign investors and on the portfolio of bilateral industrial projects, using information published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Kazakh Invest, together with figures reported in the press.

Connectivity is examined through rail cargo and transit volumes involving China, as well as developments surrounding the Trans-Caspian route. These indicators are drawn from the Ministry of Transport and World Bank assessments. Particular care is taken when interpreting investment and financing figures. Direct investment, policy-bank lending, project finance and participation by state-owned enterprises are different forms of economic involvement and should not be treated as interchangeable. The analysis therefore distinguishes between announced projects, contracted amounts and realised investment whenever the available sources allow it.

The qualitative component covers a range of policy and institutional documents. These include national programmes such as Nurly Zhol, foreign policy concepts, bilateral and institutional agreements involving China, Russia, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the European Union, presidential statements, and legislation concerning land and strategic assets.



These documents are examined using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding focuses on three broad themes: economic alignment, strategic insurance, and domestic protection and constraint. Official statements are treated as evidence of how the government presents and justifies its choices rather than as direct proof of what it actually does. Their claims are therefore compared with the quantitative indicators and with evidence from other sources. The interpretation is based on convergence across sources rather than on any single indicator. H3 is assessed by examining each policy domain and asking whether the evidence points primarily towards accommodation, primarily towards insurance, or towards a combination of both. The resulting classification is made explicit in Table 2. It remains a qualitative judgement rather than a numerical index; the study deliberately avoids reducing different forms of state behaviour to a single composite score.

3.3 Limits of inference

The analysis is descriptive and interpretive rather than causal. It does not attempt to estimate the independent effect of the BRI on Kazakhstan's economic or foreign-policy choices because developments after 2013 were also influenced by other factors, including commodity prices, changes in the Russian economy, shifts in global trade and domestic reforms.

There are also important limitations in the underlying data. Kazakh and Chinese trade statistics do not always match, so the analysis relies primarily on Kazakh official series and treats discrepancies cautiously. Investment figures may also understate the scale of Chinese involvement when capital is channelled through third countries or when Chinese participation takes the form of loans rather than direct investment. Evidence on technology transfer, employment creation and domestic value added is more limited, which makes it difficult to assess some of the longer-term effects of Chinese projects.

The study also does not calculate concentration indices or construct complete time series for every indicator. Claims about trends therefore rely on the reported volumes, shares and rankings available from the selected sources. Finally, the single-case design limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised to other countries. The absence of interviews is another limitation: elite and public perceptions cannot be observed directly and are instead inferred from policy documents, official statements and relevant secondary research.

These limitations do not invalidate the analysis, but they define the level of confidence with which its findings should be interpreted. The purpose is not to establish a universal causal model of BRI engagement, but to provide a systematic account of how Kazakhstan combines economic accommodation with strategic insurance across different policy domains.

4. Economic bandwagoning: trade, investment and connectivity

4.1 Trade

China was already an important economic partner for Kazakhstan before the launch of the BRI. What changed after 2013 was not simply the existence of bilateral trade, but the extent to which economic relations became embedded in a broader framework of infrastructure development, industrial cooperation and cross-border connectivity. The BRI therefore reinforced an existing relationship rather than creating it from scratch.

Recent trade data illustrate the scale of this relationship. According to Kazakhstan's Bureau of National Statistics, China accounted for 19.2% of Kazakhstan's exports and 29.2% of its imports in 2025. Russia accounted for 10.3% of exports and 29.7% of imports, while Italy represented 19.8% of exports. These figures show that China is one of Kazakhstan's most



important individual trading partners, particularly on the import side, but they do not indicate an exclusive dependence on China. Other major partners remain significant, which is consistent with Kazakhstan's broader strategy of maintaining diversified external economic relations.

The composition of trade is also important for assessing the nature of economic bandwagoning. Kazakhstan's exports remain heavily concentrated in primary commodities. In 2025, crude oil and petroleum products accounted for around half of total exports, followed by products such as radioactive chemical elements and isotopes, refined copper, copper ores and ferroalloys. Imports from China, by contrast, include passenger vehicles, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications equipment and automotive components. This pattern provides Kazakhstan with access to Chinese demand and manufactured goods, but it also reproduces an asymmetric structure in which Kazakhstan continues to rely heavily on resource exports while importing a broader range of manufactured products. As Pomfret (2019) notes, Kazakhstan's economic integration with external markets has not automatically produced a transition away from resource dependence.

Agricultural trade provides another indication of the opportunities created by access to the Chinese market. Bilateral trade in agricultural products reached approximately US\$1.1 billion in 2024, while 1,718 Kazakh agricultural enterprises had been authorised to export to China. These developments suggest that the relationship is not limited to hydrocarbons and minerals and that Kazakhstan has sought to expand its access to the Chinese market in selected non-extractive sectors.

At the same time, the two countries report different values for bilateral trade. Kazakhstan's official statistics put bilateral trade at approximately US\$34.1 billion in 2025, whereas Chinese customs data reported through Kazakh official sources indicate a considerably higher figure of about US\$48.7 billion. A similar difference existed in 2024, when the two series recorded approximately US\$30.1 billion and US\$43.8 billion, respectively. These discrepancies are not sufficient to establish a different overall direction of the relationship, but they do require caution when comparing bilateral trade totals. For consistency, this article relies primarily on Kazakhstan's official trade series when calculating the country's export and import shares, while treating the Chinese customs figures as a complementary measure rather than combining the two datasets.

Overall, the trade evidence provides qualified support for H1. Kazakhstan has clearly deepened and institutionalised its economic engagement with China, but the relationship remains embedded in a wider network of trading partners. Moreover, the persistence of a commodity-heavy export structure means that greater trade integration with China does not necessarily imply greater economic diversification. The evidence is therefore more consistent with economic bandwagoning combined with diversification than with exclusive alignment.

4.2 Investment and industrial cooperation

Investment provides a second dimension through which Kazakhstan has sought to benefit from China's economic rise. Chinese capital was already present in Kazakhstan's energy sector before the BRI, particularly in oil and gas. Since 2013, however, bilateral investment cooperation has become more institutionalised and has expanded into a wider range of sectors. The Kazakhstan–China Coordination Committee has provided an important framework for this process. Following its 21st meeting in October 2024, the Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported a portfolio of 47 priority projects with a total value of US\$14.74 billion. The projects



covered energy, oil and gas, petrochemicals, metallurgy, mining, agriculture, manufacturing, transport and finance. The breadth of this portfolio illustrates that the relationship has increasingly moved beyond bilateral energy cooperation towards a broader form of industrial and infrastructure integration.

Chinese foreign direct investment has also increased substantially. Chinese FDI in Kazakhstan reached approximately US\$2.8 billion in 2025, representing a 135% increase compared with the previous year. Cumulative Chinese investment since 2005 reached about US\$29.3 billion. These figures confirm the growing importance of China as a source of capital for the Kazakh economy.

The position of China among Kazakhstan's investors, however, is important for interpreting this increase. In 2025, China was among the country's leading foreign investors, but it did not account for all or even most foreign investment. Official Kazakh figures place the Netherlands first, followed by Russia and China, with Chinese investment amounting to approximately US\$2.8 billion. This suggests that the growth of Chinese investment has occurred alongside continued access to capital from other countries rather than through the replacement of alternative sources.

This pattern is consistent with the logic of economic bandwagoning, but only in a qualified sense. Kazakhstan has actively sought Chinese capital where it can support infrastructure, production and industrial development, while continuing to maintain relationships with other investors. The objective is therefore not simply to maximise Chinese investment, but to use China's economic weight as one component of a broader development strategy.

There is also an important measurement limitation. Reported FDI does not capture every form of Chinese economic involvement in Kazakhstan. Policy-bank lending, project finance, state-owned enterprise participation and investment routed through third countries may not appear in conventional FDI statistics in the same way. Consequently, the US\$2.8 billion figure should not be interpreted as a complete measure of Chinese economic exposure. At the same time, it should not be inflated by automatically treating every Chinese-financed project as FDI.

This distinction matters for the interpretation of industrial cooperation. The existence of a large portfolio of projects demonstrates institutional commitment and planned cooperation, but it does not by itself establish the extent to which these projects generate domestic value added, technology transfer or employment for Kazakhstan. As Jepson and Baldakova (2024) show in their comparative discussion of downstream linkages, the developmental effects of externally financed resource and infrastructure projects depend heavily on the extent to which local economies are integrated into production chains. Kazakhstan's national-level data do not yet allow these effects to be assessed systematically across the entire Chinese project portfolio.

The investment evidence therefore supports H1 while also qualifying it. Kazakhstan has clearly increased its efforts to attract Chinese capital and to integrate Chinese firms into national development priorities. Yet this process has not displaced all alternative investors, and the developmental effects of Chinese investment remain uneven.

4.3 Connectivity, Khorgos and the BRI

Connectivity provides the clearest empirical link between Kazakhstan's economic strategy and the BRI. Kazakhstan's own infrastructure agenda preceded the initiative. The Nurly Zhol programme, launched in 2014, sought to modernise transport infrastructure and strengthen the country's position as a regional logistics hub. Its subsequent coordination with the BRI created



an institutional framework through which Kazakhstan could connect national infrastructure priorities to China's broader Eurasian connectivity strategy (Kassenova, 2017).

Several transport routes have become central to this process, including the rail crossings at Dostyk–Alashankou and Altynkol–Khorgos. The Khorgos area has developed into a major logistics and transshipment centre on the Kazakhstan–China border, combining railway infrastructure, logistics facilities and a special economic zone. Its geographical importance derives partly from the need to manage the transition between China's standard-gauge railway system and Kazakhstan's broader post-Soviet gauge. In this sense, Kazakhstan is not simply receiving Chinese infrastructure; it is attempting to position its territory as an intermediary space between Chinese production and European markets.

The growth of rail freight supports this interpretation. In 2024, rail freight between Kazakhstan and China exceeded 32 million tonnes, reaching a historical high. According to Kazakhstan's Ministry of Transport, Kazakh exports to China amounted to 13.7 million tonnes, while transit traffic increased by 19% to 15.3 million tonnes. Container transit towards Europe also increased by 43%. These figures indicate that Kazakhstan's role is extending beyond bilateral trade towards the provision of transit and logistics services.

Another Kazakh official source reports approximately 19.9 million tonnes of railway freight moving from Kazakhstan towards China in 2024. This figure should not be directly compared with the 13.7 million tonnes of exports because the two statistics refer to different categories of traffic. The distinction is important: the former concerns a broader bilateral railway-flow measure, whereas the latter specifically refers to exports. The figures should therefore not be added together or presented as contradictory.

The connectivity strategy also illustrates why economic bandwagoning and strategic hedging cannot always be separated neatly. Kazakhstan benefits from China's demand for efficient routes to Europe, while simultaneously increasing the number of routes through which it can access international markets. The development of the Trans-Caspian or Middle Corridor is particularly relevant in this regard. It strengthens Kazakhstan's position as a transit country and provides an additional route between China and Europe, while reducing exclusive reliance on routes passing through Russia.

However, infrastructure development should not automatically be equated with economic transformation. Earlier research has questioned whether improved transport infrastructure alone can overcome constraints related to production capacity, border procedures and governance (Peyrouse & Raballand, 2015). More recent World Bank assessments similarly identify capacity, coordination, transshipment and border-management bottlenecks along the Middle Corridor. The corridor therefore creates significant opportunities, but its long-term economic benefits depend on improvements in logistics efficiency and domestic productive capacity.

Recent international financing also illustrates the strategic importance attached to this connectivity agenda. In February 2026, the World Bank announced support for rail connectivity and logistics in Kazakhstan, including an US\$846 million IBRD guarantee expected to mobilise approximately US\$1.41 billion in commercial financing. Such support shows that Kazakhstan's connectivity strategy is not exclusively dependent on Chinese financing and that other international institutions can contribute to the development of infrastructure associated with Eurasian trade.



Connectivity consequently provides some of the strongest evidence for H1. Kazakhstan has aligned major transport priorities with the opportunities created by the BRI and has benefited from increased trade and transit flows. At the same time, the development of multiple corridors gives Kazakhstan additional strategic options. The same infrastructure can therefore simultaneously serve as an instrument of economic accommodation and as a source of strategic insurance.

4.4 Gains, limits and assessment of H1

Taken together, the evidence indicates that Kazakhstan has pursued substantial economic engagement with China since 2013. The main gains are visible in three areas. First, China provides a large market for Kazakhstan's hydrocarbons, minerals and increasingly agricultural products. Second, Chinese capital and bilateral project cooperation contribute to infrastructure and industrial development. Third, the expansion of rail and logistics connections strengthens Kazakhstan's potential role as a transit bridge between China and Europe.

The benefits, however, remain unevenly distributed. Kazakhstan's export structure continues to be dominated by commodities, while many Chinese imports are manufactured or technologically intensive goods. The expansion of logistics and infrastructure may generate opportunities in transport, construction, extractive industries and border regions, but the available evidence is insufficient to establish the scale of employment creation, technology transfer or domestic value added across the entire Chinese project portfolio.

The evidence therefore provides substantial but qualified support for H1. Kazakhstan has deepened its economic engagement with China in trade, investment, industrial cooperation and connectivity, and this engagement has been supported by state policies and institutional arrangements. Yet the pattern does not amount to exclusive economic alignment. Kazakhstan continues to cultivate other investors, trading partners and transport corridors, while seeking to capture the benefits of Chinese economic power without abandoning alternative sources of economic and strategic support.

The most appropriate interpretation is therefore economic bandwagoning with diversification. Kazakhstan has accommodated China's growing economic role because doing so offers tangible developmental and connectivity benefits. At the same time, the country's efforts to preserve alternative partners and routes point towards a second process that becomes more visible outside the purely economic domain. This provides the basis for the analysis of strategic hedging in the next section.

5. Strategic hedging: institutions, routes, security and domestic constraints

5.1 Institutional diversification

Kazakhstan operates within several overlapping institutional frameworks, and this institutional diversity is an important part of its strategy for managing external dependence. The country joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) when the organisation became operational in January 2015, placing part of its economic relationship with China within a regional framework in which Russia remains a central actor. The agreement on trade and economic cooperation between the EAEU and China, signed in May 2018, subsequently provided an additional multilateral framework for economic interaction. In Kuik's (2016) terms, this can be understood as a form of binding engagement: Kazakhstan does not seek to prevent Chinese economic integration, but it situates part of that relationship within broader institutional arrangements rather than relying exclusively on bilateral ties with Beijing.



At the same time, Kazakhstan has maintained close relations with the European Union. The Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement provides an institutional basis for cooperation, while the 2022 EU–Kazakhstan joint statement described the EU as Kazakhstan's main trade and investment partner and highlighted cooperation in areas including the green economy, digitalisation, connectivity and critical raw materials. These relationships do not amount to institutional balancing against China. Rather, Kazakhstan participates simultaneously in frameworks associated with Russia, China and the European Union. This pattern is more consistent with hedging than with either classical balancing or comprehensive bandwagoning.

The importance of European partners is also visible in investment flows. As discussed in Section 4.2, European countries such as the Netherlands and Belgium have ranked among Kazakhstan's major sources of foreign investment. This matters because institutional diversification is not merely diplomatic. It is reinforced by actual economic relationships that provide Kazakhstan with alternatives to Chinese capital.

The interaction between Russia and China is another part of this institutional environment. Moscow and Beijing have supported greater coordination between the EAEU and the BRI, potentially reducing the risk that Kazakhstan would have to choose between the two frameworks. At the same time, closer coordination between the two larger powers could also limit Kazakhstan's room for manoeuvre if major decisions concerning regional connectivity were negotiated primarily between them. Kazakhstan's response has therefore been to participate actively in both frameworks while maintaining relations with third partners. Such diversification can reduce the costs of exclusion and preserve bargaining space, which is consistent with the logic of hedging (Cooley, 2012).

5.2 Alternative routes and energy

Infrastructure and energy provide a second important source of strategic insurance. As a landlocked country, Kazakhstan depends on external transport corridors to reach international markets. Its energy exports are similarly dependent on infrastructure that crosses neighbouring states. Closer connectivity with China therefore creates significant economic opportunities, but maintaining alternative routes remains important because it reduces the risks associated with relying too heavily on any single transit direction.

The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, commonly known as the Middle Corridor, is particularly relevant. It connects China and Europe through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Türkiye. World Bank analysis identifies the corridor as a potential source of route diversification and resilience for China–Europe trade (World Bank, 2023). Importantly, the corridor is compatible with the broader objectives of the BRI while also providing Kazakhstan with a route that does not depend on Russian territory. Its strategic value therefore extends beyond its immediate economic function.

Kazakhstan has continued to invest in this infrastructure. In November 2024, the World Bank approved US\$650 million for the Transport Resilience and Connectivity Enhancement Project, which includes improvements to the Jezkazgan–Karagandy road section of the corridor (World Bank, 2024). In February 2026, the World Bank also announced an US\$846 million guarantee intended to mobilise approximately US\$1.41 billion in commercial financing for railway development. The project includes a new 322.3-kilometre section between Mointy and



Kyzylzhar, designed to shorten the route by approximately 149 kilometres and increase transport capacity (World Bank, 2026a).

These investments should not, however, be interpreted as evidence that Kazakhstan is replacing its existing routes. The World Bank continues to identify infrastructure, coordination and operational constraints along the Middle Corridor and notes that transcontinental traffic currently represents only a limited share of total volumes (World Bank, 2023). The corridor is therefore better understood as an additional option whose strategic value lies partly in diversification.

The longer-term nature of this strategy is also reflected in more recent World Bank assessments. A September 2026 World Bank report covering countries from Türkiye to Central Asia estimates that more than US\$25 billion in physical infrastructure investment and around US\$30 billion in enabling investment could be required through 2040. It also stresses that the benefits of improved connectivity depend on institutional reform and effective cross-border coordination (World Bank, 2026b). Route diversification is consequently a long-term strategy rather than an immediate substitute for existing corridors.

The same logic applies to energy. A large share of Kazakhstan's crude oil exports has historically travelled through the Caspian Pipeline Consortium system to a Russian Black Sea terminal, while the Atasu–Alashankou oil pipeline and gas infrastructure connecting Central Asia with China provide alternative links towards the Chinese market. Disruptions affecting the Black Sea export infrastructure have highlighted the vulnerability associated with dependence on a limited number of transit routes. Maintaining connections in both directions reduces the likelihood that disruption along one route will translate into comprehensive external dependence.

This form of hedging is therefore not directed exclusively against China. Kazakhstan also has an interest in reducing excessive dependence on Russian transit infrastructure. The objective is not decoupling from either power, but the maintenance of redundancy and alternative options. In this sense, infrastructure diversification illustrates particularly well how economic cooperation and strategic insurance can operate simultaneously.

5.3 Security and diplomatic positioning

The security domain provides a clearer distinction between Kazakhstan's economic engagement with China and its security relationships. Kazakhstan remains linked to Russia through the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), while also participating in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and maintaining bilateral relations with China.

The events of January 2022 demonstrated the practical significance of the Russian security relationship. Following a decision by the CSTO Collective Security Council on 6 January 2022, peacekeeping contingents from several member states, including Russia, were deployed to Kazakhstan at the request of the Kazakh authorities. Their mandate was limited and focused on protecting strategic facilities and supporting the security situation during the unrest. The episode nevertheless demonstrated that Russia retained a concrete security role in Kazakhstan that China did not exercise to the same extent.

China's regional security engagement operates through different channels, including the SCO and bilateral cooperation. However, the evidence used in this study does not allow for a detailed assessment of the full scope or effectiveness of Kazakhstan–China bilateral security



cooperation. This limitation is important because the absence of evidence of a comparable Chinese security role should not be interpreted as evidence that no such cooperation exists. Kazakhstan's diplomatic behaviour following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine further illustrates this selectivity. The country has remained within Russian-led institutions while simultaneously placing considerable emphasis on sovereignty and territorial integrity in its diplomatic discourse. This can be interpreted, cautiously, as a form of dominance denial within the broader hedging literature. Kazakhstan has not sought to balance directly against Russia or China. Instead, it has maintained security ties with Russia, economic engagement with China and diplomatic relationships with a wider set of partners.

This pattern supports the domain-specific argument advanced in H3. Economic accommodation of China does not automatically translate into equivalent political or security alignment. The security domain is governed by a different set of constraints and relationships, producing a more differentiated strategy.

5.4 Domestic regulation and public perceptions

Strategic hedging also has a domestic dimension. External economic engagement must remain politically acceptable at home, particularly when it involves land, strategic assets or foreign ownership. Kazakhstan's experience with agricultural land reform illustrates this constraint. In 2016, proposed changes to agricultural land regulations, including provisions concerning the leasing of land to foreigners, triggered protests in several cities. President Nursultan Nazarbayev subsequently postponed the reform and established a review process. The resulting framework retained significant restrictions on foreign participation in agricultural land use. Official investment guidance indicates that the moratorium on granting certain agricultural land-use rights to foreigners and foreign-controlled legal entities has been extended through 31 December 2026.

The 2016 protests should not be interpreted solely as a reaction to China. They reflected broader concerns about land ownership, national sovereignty, transparency and the distribution of economic benefits. Nevertheless, subsequent public debates increasingly connected questions of land and foreign investment to perceptions of Chinese influence. This makes the episode relevant to the study of hedging because it shows how domestic political constraints can place limits on the degree of economic openness that the government is willing or able to pursue (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2012).

The relationship between domestic governance and the BRI has also been visible at the policy level. Kassenova (2020) argues that Kazakhstan adapted elements of its domestic governance and regulatory environment in response to the BRI, partly in an effort to improve the investment climate and attract foreign capital. This illustrates the two-sided nature of economic engagement: the government seeks to facilitate external investment while simultaneously managing its domestic political consequences.

Public reactions became visible again in 2019, when demonstrations took place in several cities over proposed Chinese industrial projects and concerns about growing Chinese influence. Contemporary reporting, including Reuters, highlighted concerns surrounding factories, employment and the perceived scale of Chinese involvement. Such reactions reflect a broader ambivalence towards China in Central Asia. Peyrouse (2016) shows that perceptions of China can combine admiration for its economic achievements with concerns about its growing power, with attitudes varying across social groups and contexts.



Concerns relating to developments in Xinjiang and the treatment of ethnic Kazakhs and other Turkic Muslim populations, as well as questions about the transparency of some intergovernmental agreements, have also contributed to public scepticism. These perceptions matter because they can constrain the government's room for manoeuvre even when Chinese investment offers clear economic benefits.

From the perspective of Putnam's (1988) two-level game framework, domestic acceptance is therefore part of the external bargaining environment. Government decisions must remain compatible not only with international economic objectives but also with domestic political constraints. Regulatory restrictions and controls in sensitive areas consequently perform two functions at once: they respond to domestic concerns and provide a degree of strategic insurance against excessive external dependence.

This domestic dimension qualifies a purely material interpretation of economic bandwagoning. Kazakhstan may seek Chinese capital, markets and infrastructure, but economic openness is neither unlimited nor politically cost-free. The government's ability to deepen cooperation depends partly on its capacity to manage domestic perceptions of foreign influence.

5.5 Assessment of H2 and H3

The evidence provides substantial support for both H2 and H3. Kazakhstan has developed several mechanisms that can reduce the risks associated with concentrated dependence on China. These include participation in the EAEU, sustained engagement with the European Union, development of alternative transport corridors, diversified energy connections, continued reliance on Russian security institutions and regulatory restrictions in politically sensitive areas.

These instruments do not amount to a strategy of balancing against China. Kazakhstan has not attempted to disengage from Chinese markets, investment or infrastructure. Instead, it has sought to preserve alternatives while continuing to benefit from cooperation with Beijing. The Middle Corridor illustrates this dual logic particularly well: it facilitates China's trade with Europe while simultaneously giving Kazakhstan a route that does not depend on Russian territory.

The cross-domain comparison also supports H3. The evidence does not suggest that Kazakhstan applies a single foreign-policy strategy uniformly across all areas. Economic domains show the strongest evidence of accommodation of Chinese interests, particularly in trade, investment and connectivity. By contrast, institutional diversification, alternative routes, security arrangements and domestic regulatory controls provide forms of insurance against excessive dependence.

The assessment of H3 is therefore qualitative rather than based on a composite index. As specified in Table 2, the analysis classifies each domain according to whether the evidence indicates accommodation, insurance, or a combination of both. This approach preserves the differences between policy domains rather than reducing them to a single numerical measure. Overall, Kazakhstan's strategy is best characterised not as a choice between bandwagoning and hedging, but as a differentiated combination of the two. The country accommodates China where Chinese economic power offers clear material benefits, while maintaining institutional, infrastructural, security and domestic safeguards where dependence could create greater strategic or political risks. This domain-specific pattern is central to understanding Kazakhstan's response to the BRI.



6. Discussion

The findings suggest that Kazakhstan's response to the BRI cannot be adequately described as either straightforward bandwagoning or conventional balancing. The evidence points instead to a differentiated strategy in which the relative weight of economic accommodation and strategic insurance varies across policy domains. This is why the policy domain, rather than the country as a whole, is the most useful unit of analysis. A simple classification of Kazakhstan as either a “bandwagoner” or a “hedger” would obscure important differences between trade, investment, transport, security and domestic regulation.

Table 2. Dominant behaviour by policy domain

<i>Domain</i>	<i>Main observed behaviour</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>Trade</i>	Strong engagement with China alongside other major partners	Economic bandwagoning with diversification
<i>Investment and industrial cooperation</i>	Selective acceptance of Chinese capital and projects	Selective bandwagoning
<i>Transport and logistics</i>	Deep integration with China–Europe connectivity alongside support for the Middle Corridor	Bandwagoning combined with strategic insurance
<i>Energy routes</i>	Connections to China alongside other export routes	Hedging
<i>Security</i>	Continued Russian security ties alongside broader external partnerships	Hedging
<i>Diplomacy and institutions</i>	Engagement with China, Russia, the EU and other partners	Binding engagement and dominance denial
<i>Domestic regulation</i>	Restrictions on land use and other sensitive areas	Domestic insurance and protection of autonomy

Three implications follow from this pattern.

First, the findings clarify the relationship between bandwagoning and hedging. Because hedging can include limited forms of bandwagoning, the presence of strong economic engagement with China does not contradict hedging theory. Instead, the Kazakhstan case suggests that the intensity of engagement and the extent of insurance can vary across domains. This supports Ciorciari and Haacke's (2019) call for greater precision in the use of the hedging concept. Kazakhstan can therefore deepen economic cooperation with China without adopting the same degree of accommodation in security, institutional or domestic regulatory matters. The important analytical question is not whether one strategy excludes the other, but where each becomes more visible and what functions it serves.

Second, the findings highlight the role of state agency under conditions of asymmetry. Kazakhstan's relationship with China is highly unequal in economic size and bargaining power, and meaningful diversification requires infrastructure, investment and time. Kazakhstan therefore cannot simply replace one major partner with another whenever political circumstances change. Its agency is consequently constrained rather than unlimited. Nevertheless, the government has sought to use Kazakhstan's geography, natural resources and



transit position to create bargaining opportunities. The development of alternative corridors, continued engagement with European partners and participation in several regional institutions all contribute to this effort. The objective appears to be less complete strategic autonomy than the preservation of sufficient room for manoeuvre.

Third, domestic politics operate as an important boundary condition. Public opposition does not determine foreign economic policy, but it can narrow the range of agreements that are politically feasible. The controversies surrounding land reform and Chinese industrial projects illustrate this constraint. They help explain why economic openness has been accompanied by regulatory controls and political management. In this respect, domestic legitimacy is not separate from foreign-policy strategy: it forms part of the environment within which external economic relationships are negotiated.

6.1 Alternative explanations

Three alternative interpretations deserve consideration.

The first is structural necessity. From this perspective, Kazakhstan engages China and maintains its links with Russia simply because its geographical position and economic structure leave it with limited alternatives. There is considerable truth in this argument. Kazakhstan is landlocked, highly dependent on external transport corridors and still strongly reliant on commodity exports. However, structural constraints alone do not fully explain the observed pattern. The creation of the Kazakhstan–China Coordination Committee, the alignment of Nurly Zhol with the BRI and the continued development of the Middle Corridor indicate active policy choices in addition to structural necessity. Constraints shape the available options, but they do not eliminate agency.

The second interpretation is commodity logic. According to this view, Kazakhstan's trade relationship with China mainly reflects the location of demand for oil, uranium, metals and other commodities rather than a deliberate strategy of bandwagoning. This explanation is particularly relevant to the trade findings. For that reason, trade data in this study are used primarily to establish the scale and persistence of economic engagement, not to infer political intent. The explanation is less convincing, however, when applied to institutional memberships, transport planning or domestic restrictions on land and sensitive assets, because these measures cannot be reduced simply to the location of commodity demand.

The third interpretation is that hedging is largely rhetorical. States may describe their foreign policy as “multi-vector” or “balanced” without actually developing mechanisms that reduce dependence. The present analysis addresses this possibility by focusing on observable instruments rather than official declarations alone. Institutional memberships, alternative transport investments, diversified energy routes, security arrangements and domestic regulatory restrictions provide evidence of concrete forms of insurance. This does not mean that every instrument was created specifically to hedge against China, but it shows that Kazakhstan possesses mechanisms that can limit excessive dependence on any single external power.

6.2 The dynamic character of the strategy

The balance between accommodation and insurance is also dynamic. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine increased the strategic importance of transport routes that avoid Russian territory and exposed the risks associated with dependence on a limited number of corridors. At the same time, Kazakhstan's economic relationship with China continued to deepen. World



Bank financing approved between 2024 and 2026 for transport resilience and railway connectivity illustrates this parallel development: Kazakhstan can continue to benefit from China's economic weight while investing in infrastructure that increases the number of routes available to it.

This dynamic character reinforces the argument for treating hedging as a process rather than as a fixed foreign-policy label. The relative weight of different instruments can change as the regional environment changes. A route that initially functions primarily as an economic corridor can acquire greater strategic value when geopolitical conditions alter the risks associated with other routes. Similarly, institutional participation may serve primarily economic purposes in one period and become more important as a mechanism of strategic insurance in another.

6.3 Implications for the study of BRI recipient states

The Kazakhstan case suggests three broader cautions for research on BRI recipient states.

First, participation should not automatically be equated with comprehensive political alignment. A state can participate deeply in Chinese-led economic initiatives while maintaining relationships with other powers and preserving institutional or regulatory safeguards. Measures based only on trade or investment may therefore overstate the extent of broader political alignment.

Second, integration should be distinguished from economic upgrading. Kazakhstan's continued reliance on resource exports and its imports of manufactured goods show that greater connectivity does not automatically transform the structure of the domestic economy. BRI-related infrastructure can improve market access and transit capacity without necessarily producing substantial domestic value added.

Third, hedging should be identified through observable instruments rather than declarations of multi-vectorism alone. A government's claim to pursue a balanced foreign policy is not sufficient evidence of hedging. Researchers should examine whether the state actually maintains alternative partners, routes, institutions, security relationships or regulatory safeguards that can reduce exposure to dependence.

Taken together, these findings support the article's central argument. Kazakhstan's response to the BRI is neither simple alignment nor resistance. It is a differentiated strategy in which economic accommodation is strongest where Chinese engagement offers clear material benefits, while insurance becomes more visible where dependence could create strategic, political or domestic risks.

7. Conclusion and implications

This article examined Kazakhstan's response to China's Belt and Road Initiative through the complementary lenses of economic bandwagoning and strategic hedging. The findings indicate sustained and state-supported engagement with China in trade, industrial cooperation and transport, with particularly strong evidence in the expansion of connectivity. At the same time, this engagement has not become exclusive. Kazakhstan continues to trade and attract investment from a range of partners, remains a member of the EAEU and the CSTO, maintains extensive relations with the European Union, develops alternative transport routes through the Middle Corridor and retains restrictions on foreign access to agricultural land and other sensitive areas.



The evidence therefore supports the three hypotheses, although with important qualifications. H1 receives the strongest support in the connectivity domain, where the expansion of China–Kazakhstan rail and logistics links provides clear evidence of deepening economic engagement. The evidence for trade and investment is also substantial, but it is more difficult to interpret as evidence of the effects of the BRI itself because important economic ties with China predated 2013 and are influenced by broader market forces. H2 is supported by Kazakhstan's efforts to maintain institutional, infrastructural, security and regulatory alternatives. H3 is supported by the differences observed across domains: economic accommodation is more pronounced in trade, investment and transport, while insurance is more visible in institutional diversification, alternative routes, security and domestic regulation.

Recent developments are broadly consistent with this pattern. Kazakh statistics place China among the country's two largest individual trading partners in 2025, while Chinese FDI reached a record level that year. Government communications also indicate a substantial portfolio of joint industrial projects. However, reported figures vary depending on the definition and stage of projects included. For example, government communications in 2025 referred to a portfolio of 224 joint industrial projects worth approximately US\$66 billion (The Diplomatic Insight, 2025), while a September 2026 statement by President Tokayev referred to 260 major projects worth more than US\$62 billion (Trend.Az, 2026). Rather than treating these figures as contradictory, they should be understood as evidence that project portfolios are reported according to different scopes and stages of development. They should therefore be used as indicators of the scale of policy cooperation rather than as directly comparable measures of realised investment.

Similarly, the Ministry of Trade and Integration reported bilateral trade of US\$32.4 billion during the first seven months of 2026 (Ministry of Trade and Integration, 2026). Because this is a partial-year figure, it should not be compared directly with the annual trade totals discussed earlier in the article. Its significance lies instead in showing that strong bilateral economic engagement continued into 2026.

The article makes both a conceptual and an empirical contribution. Conceptually, the Kazakhstan case supports a more domain-specific application of hedging, consistent with Ciorciari and Haacke's (2019) call for greater conceptual precision. It also shows how limited bandwagoning, in Kuik's (2016) sense, can coexist with other forms of strategic insurance rather than being treated as its opposite. The relevant analytical distinction is therefore not between a state that is entirely aligned with China and one that is entirely opposed to it, but between different combinations of accommodation and insurance across policy domains.

Empirically, the study moves the discussion of the BRI in Central Asia beyond the simple alternatives of dependence and resistance. Kazakhstan's participation is deliberate and supported by state institutions, but it is accompanied by mechanisms that prevent economic engagement from automatically translating into broader strategic alignment. The country seeks to benefit from China's markets, capital and connectivity while preserving relationships and options that can reduce the risks associated with excessive dependence.

Three practical implications follow:

For Kazakhstan, the central challenge is to convert connectivity into broader domestic economic value. This requires stronger local value chains, technology transfer, workforce development and greater diversification of exports beyond commodities. At the same time,



maintaining credible alternative routes and external partners remains important because diversification has strategic as well as economic value.

For China, projects that generate visible local benefits, employment, productive linkages and transparent returns are more likely to fit Kazakhstan's domestic political constraints than projects perceived primarily as serving external strategic interests. Economic engagement is therefore more sustainable when its benefits are visible within the host economy.

For the European Union and other external partners, influence depends less on political declarations than on the ability to offer economically viable alternatives in investment, technology, logistics and market access. Kazakhstan's hedging strategy creates space for third partners, but that space is most meaningful when alternative forms of cooperation are commercially and strategically credible.

The study also has important limitations. More systematic firm-level and regional data would allow a stronger assessment of domestic value creation and the distribution of Chinese investment. Partner-concentration indices and a consistent pre-2013 baseline would improve the empirical testing of H1 and H2. Interviews with government officials, businesses and affected communities could provide additional insight into how economic accommodation and strategic insurance are negotiated in practice. Comparative research involving Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and other BRI-participating states would also help determine whether the domain-specific pattern identified here is characteristic of Kazakhstan or reflects a broader Central Asian strategy.

The broader implication is that the most useful question is not whether a state is simply “with” or “against” China. States facing major-power asymmetry may simultaneously accommodate a powerful partner, preserve alternative relationships and impose domestic limits on the depth of integration. Kazakhstan's experience shows how these processes can operate together: economic accommodation where the benefits are substantial, strategic insurance where dependence creates risks, and domestic protection where external openness encounters political constraints. This combination provides a more precise way of understanding how middle and smaller states navigate the opportunities and risks created by the BRI.

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