

Diplomatic Strategies and Regional Power Balances: China-Kazakhstan Relations in the Eurasian Context

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Abstract: This article takes the geopolitics of Eurasia as the macro background and systematically examines the strategic connotation, interaction mode of the diplomatic relations between China and Kazakhstan, as well as their profound impact on the regional power balance. The paper first sorts out the historical evolution and strategic foundation of China-Kazakhstan relations from the establishment of diplomatic relations to the construction of a permanent comprehensive strategic partnership, and then deeply analyzes the institutionalized cooperation and interaction models of the two sides in the main fields such as politics, economy and culture. Research reveals that the deepening of China-Kazakhstan relations has not only significantly reshaped the power structure in Central Asia, creating a "rebalancing" effect on traditional dominant forces such as Russia and the United States, but also provided new public goods for regional governance through the connection of the "Belt and Road Initiative" and the "Path of Light". Despite challenges such as external intervention and economic structural differences, China-Kazakhstan relations have demonstrated broad prospects for development in emerging fields like green energy and the digital economy. Their successful practices offer significant implications for the evolution of the Eurasian and even global order.

Keywords: Diplomatic Strategies; Regional Power Balances; China-Kazakhstan Relations; Eurasian Context

DOI: 10.69979/3041-0843.26.01.003

Introduction

In the current context where the process of globalization is encountering headwinds and the geopolitical landscape is accelerating its reorganization, the strategic importance of the Eurasian continent as the "heartland" of the world is becoming increasingly prominent. Among them, the relationship between China and Kazakhstan has transcended the simple bilateral scope and has become a key barometer for observing the power balance, cooperation model and future direction of the entire region. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, how has China-Kazakhstan relations achieved leapfrog development in just over three decades and formed an increasingly close community with a shared future? How does its in-depth development reshape the power structure in the Eurasian region and what potential risks and challenges does it face? This article aims to traverse the complex international phenomena, systematically analyze the historical context, strategic foundation, core areas and interaction logic of China-Kazakhstan relations, and deeply interpret the role it plays as a constructive force on the Eurasian geopolitical chessboard and the multi-dimensional impacts it generates. In order to provide a theoretical reflection and practical reference for understanding the evolution of the relationship between major powers and regional countries in the new era.

1 The Historical evolution and strategic Foundation of China-Kazakhstan diplomatic Relations

1.1 The Development Stages and Main Characteristics of China-Kazakhstan Diplomatic Relations

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Kazakhstan on January 3, 1992, bilateral relations have undergone a comprehensive deepening from good-neighborliness and friendship to strategic coordination, forming an increasingly close community with a shared future. This process exhibits distinct characteristics of phased deepening and can roughly be divided into four key stages: The construction of good-neighborly and friendly relations in the early stage of the establishment of diplomatic relations (1992-2004), the institutionalized cooperation construction in the strategic partnership stage (2005-2010), the multi-field expansion in the comprehensive strategic partnership stage (2011-2018), and the deepening development in the permanent comprehensive strategic partnership stage (2019 to present).

In terms of the formation mechanism of political mutual trust, China and Kazakhstan have established a solid foundation of trust through multi-level and high-frequency high-level interactions. Such high-level mutual visits are not limited to symbolic diplomacy but have also facilitated the signing of a series of substantive cooperation documents, such as the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation between China and Kazakhstan (2002) and the Plan for Cooperation on Production Capacity and Investment between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2023). Most importantly, the two countries established the Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue mechanism in 2024 and signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the establishment of this mechanism, marking the further institutionalization and normalization of bilateral communication channels.

Table 1. Timeline of Major Events in China-Kazakhstan Bilateral Relations (1992-2025)

Period	Milestone Events	Bilateral Label	Key Outcomes
1992-2004	3 Jan 1992 – diplomatic relations established; 2002 – Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation signed	Friendly Good-Neighborly Relations	Legal foundation laid; border issues resolved; basic cooperation framework created
2005-2010	2005 – Strategic Partnership established; Kazakhstan-China Crude-Oil Pipeline completed	Strategic Partnership	Breakthrough in energy cooperation; trade ties deepened; strategic coordination launched
2011-2018	2011 – upgraded to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership; 2013 – Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) announced	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	Alignment of BRI and “Bright Road”; all-round cooperation expanded
2019-present	2019 – Permanent Comprehensive Strategic Partnership declared; 2022 – goal of a China-Kazakhstan community with a shared future set	Permanent Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	Institutionalized deepening of ties; cooperation fields widened; regional coordination strengthened

1.2 The Impact of the Eurasian Geopolitical Landscape on China-Kazakhstan Relations

The geopolitical pattern in the Eurasian region presents complex characteristics of multi-polar competition and dynamic balance, profoundly influencing the strategic environment of China-Kazakhstan relations. In this region, major forces such as Russia, the United States, and the European Union all have their own strategic layouts, forming a competitive coexistence situation. As a key country in Central Asia, Kazakhstan's foreign policy skillfully maintains a balance among major powers (Bai & Duan, 2025). It not only upholds its traditional relations with Russia but also actively develops cooperation with China, while maintaining constructive engagement with the West. This multi-faceted and balanced diplomacy enables Kazakhstan to safeguard its own interests and enhance its international status in a complex geopolitical environment.

As the traditional dominant power in the region, Russia maintains its influence through mechanisms such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). However, after the Ukraine crisis, Russia has faced strategic pressure due to Western sanctions, which to some extent has restricted its investment in Central Asian affairs and provided greater space for the deepening of China-Kazakhstan relations (Bai, Tang, & Wang, 2025). It is worth noting that China and Russia in Central Asia are not simply in a zero-sum competitive relationship. Instead, they maintain a dynamic balance of both cooperation and competition within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and others.

1.3 The strategic Foundation and Common Interest Structure of China-Kazakhstan Cooperation

The strategic foundation of China-Kazakhstan cooperation is built on a highly complementary economic structure and a highly compatible development strategy, forming a multi-dimensional and deep-level common interest structure. This structure, with energy cooperation as its foundation, connectivity as its artery, security collaboration as its guarantee, and cultural exchanges as its bond, jointly constitutes a solid support for the China-Kazakhstan community with a shared future.



Figure 1.

Energy complementarity is one of the most solid cornerstones of China-Kazakhstan strategic cooperation. Kazakhstan is rich in hydrocarbon and uranium resources and has become an important partner for China in ensuring energy security. Since China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) acquired the Aktobin project in 1997, energy cooperation between China and Kazakhstan has been

continuously deepened. The first cross-border oil pipeline in China - the China-Kazakhstan Crude Oil Pipeline, as well as the A/B/C lines of the China-Central Asia Natural Gas Pipeline have been completed. Chinese companies currently account for 20-25% of Kazakhstan's oil production, almost on par with KazMunayGas, the country's state-owned oil and gas company (Li & Pan, 2025). It is worth noting that the energy cooperation between the two sides has expanded from traditional oil and gas trade to full industrial chain collaboration, including the joint development of Kazakhstan's three major oil refineries (Atyrau, Shimkent and Pavlodar), and the joint investment in green energy projects, such as the Selek wind power project in Kazakhstan. This kind of cooperation not only ensures China's energy supply security, but also promotes the modernization and diversification of Kazakhstan's energy industry.

The construction of connectivity is another key strategic pillar, mainly reflected in the in-depth alignment of the "Belt and Road Initiative" with Kazakhstan's new economic policy of "The Road to Light". Up to now, China and Kazakhstan have jointly built an infrastructure network spanning the entire Kazakhstan, including the Khorgos and Dostyk transportation hubs, the "Western Europe - Western China" expressway, the Aktau Port and the Kurek Port, as well as the railway line connecting the ports to the Chinese border. The ongoing construction of the Trans-Rio International Transport Corridor is expected to reduce the transportation time from China to Europe to 20 to 25 days.

2 The main areas of diplomatic strategy and interaction models between China and Kazakhstan

2.1 Political Diplomacy: Strategic Mutual Trust and institutionalized Cooperation System

The core features of political and diplomatic relations between China and Kazakhstan are reflected in the deep integration of highly institutionalized strategic mutual trust and a multi-level cooperation framework. This mutual trust relationship has been built and consolidated through the top-level guidance of head of state diplomacy, the multilateral coordination of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and practical regional security cooperation.

Head of State diplomacy and high-level mutual visits: As a strategic navigator for China-Kazakhstan relations, head of state diplomacy has continuously injected impetus into bilateral relations. The second "Central Asia - China" summit to be held in Astana in 2025 is the latest example. The heads of state of the five Central Asian countries and the President of China attended this meeting (Wang, 2025).

The cooperation mechanism under the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization provides a crucial multilateral coordination platform for the two countries. Within this framework, China and Kazakhstan have been able to go beyond the simple bilateral scope and coordinate policies and resolve potential differences on a broader regional dimension.

Regional security cooperation model (cross-border security, counter-terrorism, drug control) : In terms of regional security cooperation, China and Kazakhstan have established a three-dimensional response mechanism. This mechanism targets non-traditional security threats such as cross-border security, counter-terrorism, and drug smuggling, covering multiple aspects including intelligence sharing, joint law enforcement, border control, and emergency response.

2.2 Economic Diplomacy: Connectivity, Energy Cooperation and Industrial Synergy

Economic diplomacy is the ballast stone and propeller of the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Kazakhstan. Based on connectivity and with energy cooperation as the pillar, the two countries are actively expanding into new heights of industrial synergy and technological cooperation, demonstrating strong resilience and vitality.

China-europe Railway Express, cross-border infrastructure and port cooperation: The cross-border infrastructure represented by the Khorgos Port is a microcosm of the connection between the "Belt and Road Initiative" and the "Bright Road". As of June 2025, the number of people entering and leaving the port reached 628,000, an increase of 36.9% year-on-year, and the number of vehicles entering and leaving the port was 225,000, an increase of 41.9% year-on-year.

Cooperation in key areas such as oil, natural gas and uranium resources: Energy cooperation has long been the cornerstone of economic relations between China and Kazakhstan. In 2024, the trade volume of goods between Kazakhstan and China reached 43.82 billion US dollars. In Kazakhstan's export structure, oil, copper, uranium, metallurgical products and agricultural products that have emerged in recent years hold a dominant position.

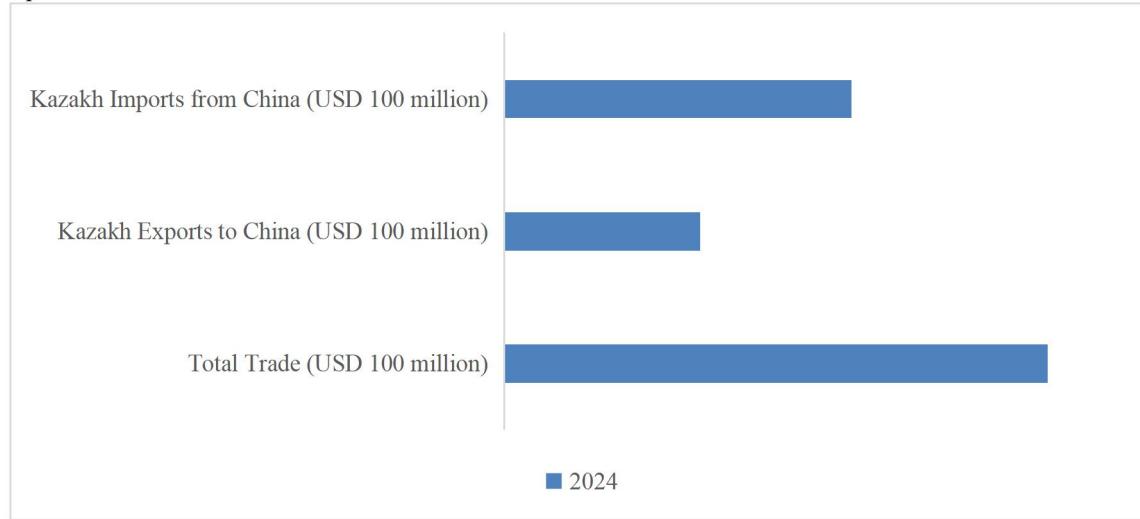


Figure 2. China-Kazakhstan Trade Structure & Trend Data

The Digital Silk Road and Technological Cooperation: In recent years, the bilateral economic and trade structure has undergone

profound changes, with the proportion of technological and high value-added products significantly increasing. In the first quarter of 2025, Kazakhstan's imports from China increased by 18%. Among imported goods, the proportion of high-tech equipment, computer technology, construction machinery and components required for digital transformation is constantly increasing.

2.3 People's Livelihood and Humanistic Diplomacy: Interaction between Social Identity and Soft Power

People's livelihood and people-to-people diplomacy are committed to building the social foundation of China-Kazakhstan relations. Through various channels such as education, culture, tourism and youth exchanges, they enhance mutual understanding and emotional identification between the people of the two countries, providing a lasting "soft power" support for the long-term development of bilateral relations.

Educational, cultural, religious and tourism exchanges: Educational cooperation is the core area of people-to-people and cultural exchanges, and its scale and depth continue to expand. Data shared by the Minister of Science and Higher Education of Kazakhstan at the first China-Central Asia Education Ministers' Conference in May 2025 shows that currently over 10,000 Kazakh students are pursuing further studies in China. Meanwhile, for the first time this semester, more than 2,000 Chinese students have come to study in Kazakhstan.

Confucius Institutes and Language Education cooperation: Language education institutions represented by Confucius Institutes serve as a bridge to promote cultural cognition and language communication. For instance, when Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics collaborates with universities in Kazakhstan, it selects a professional team of Chinese language teachers to integrate China's development cases into Chinese language teaching, helping students achieve a "dual improvement" in language proficiency and cultural cognition. This kind of cooperation goes beyond mere language teaching and incorporates an understanding of contemporary China's development.

Youth exchange programs and social mutual recognition: Youth exchange programs are the key to cultivating friendly new forces. A wide variety of exchange activities with rich contents have been carried out extensively. For instance, the Silk Road College of Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics has offered distinctive courses for Kazakh teachers and students and organized them to visit Chinese enterprises and cultural venues, transforming the theory of "Chinese economy" into immersive practical classrooms.

3 The Impact of China-Kazakhstan Relations on the Balance of Power in the Eurasian Region and Future Prospects

3.1 The Reshaping function of China-Kazakhstan relations in the power structure of the Eurasian region

The deepening of China-Kazakhstan relations has exerted a multi-dimensional reshaping effect on the power structure in the Eurasian region, mainly reflected in the competitive balance against the traditional dominant power Russia, the strategic counterbalance against the influence of the United States, and the indirect traction on regional powers such as the European Union and Turkey.

Strategic impact on Russia (Cooperation and Competition) : The development of China-Kazakhstan relations has created a complex situation where cooperation and competition coexist for Russia. On the one hand, China, Russia and Kazakhstan are cooperating in energy and other fields. For instance, Russia is promoting the construction of a new natural gas pipeline from Kazakhstan to China, with a designed annual gas transmission capacity of up to 45 billion cubic meters. Kazakhstan has played the role of an energy hub in such cooperation, enhancing its strategic position.

Rebalancing of the United States' influence in Central Asia: China-Kazakhstan relations have played a key balancing role in responding to the United States' regional influence. In recent years, the United States has strengthened its involvement in Central Asia through the "C5+1" mechanism. For instance, at the summit in November 2025, it pushed for cooperation agreements worth approximately 17 billion US dollars with Kazakhstan and other countries, covering areas such as critical minerals, aviation, and digital technology. It also plans to repeal the Jackson-Vanick Amendment to expand trade (Zhang, 2025).

The indirect impact on regional forces such as the European Union and Turkey: The deepening of China-Kazakhstan relations has indirectly reshaped the way other forces participate in Eurasian affairs. The influence of the European Union in Eurasia is mainly reflected in rule-making and limited investment, but its overall investment is far less than that of China. In the face of the substantive progress made by China and Kazakhstan in the construction of energy and transport corridors, if the EU wants to expand its regional influence, it will have to adjust its strategy and be more inclined to choose to cooperate or connect with the platforms led by China and Kazakhstan.

3.2 The Roles and Contributions of China and Kazakhstan in Regional Governance

China and Kazakhstan are playing an increasingly crucial and constructive role in areas such as regional order building, energy supply chain stability, and public security governance through bilateral and multilateral channels.

The role of the Belt and Road Initiative in building regional order in Central Asia: The practice of China-Kazakhstan cooperation has become a model for the Belt and Road Initiative in building regional order in Central Asia. At the second China-Central Asia Summit, all parties jointly declared 2025-2026 as the "Year of High-Quality Development of China-Central Asia Cooperation" and planned cooperation in six major directions including trade facilitation and industrial investment.

Energy security and supply chain stability: In the field of energy security, China-Kazakhstan cooperation has made significant contributions to maintaining the stability of regional and global supply chains. Kazakhstan is not only a reliable energy supplier to China, but has also risen to become a key energy hub through its participation in the China-Russia gas pipeline transit project. The planned new pipeline has an annual gas transmission capacity of 45 billion cubic meters. It can not only meet part of China's demand but also supply Kazakhstan itself, achieving a win-win situation for all parties involved.

Regional public security governance (counter-terrorism, anti-transnational crime) : In the field of security, China and Kazakhstan have carried out in-depth law enforcement and security cooperation within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and others, jointly addressing non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, extremism and transnational organized crime.

3.3 Risks, Challenges and Prospects for the Development of China-Kazakhstan Relations

Although the development momentum of China-Kazakhstan relations is good, its future process still faces multiple challenges such as external intervention and internal economic structural differences.

External force intervention and geopolitical competition risks: The most notable external risk to China-Kazakhstan relations stems from the game among major powers in the Eurasian region. Although the "transaction diplomacy" pursued by the United States during the Trump administration lacked security support, its attempt to reshape the regional economic and strategic landscape through huge investment agreements (such as about 17 billion US dollars in cooperation with Kazakhstan in critical minerals, aviation, AI and other fields) may pose potential competition to China-Kazakhstan cooperation in the medium and long term ("China-Kazakhstan Energy Trade Relations," 2015).

Economic structural differences and unbalanced interests: Although China-Kazakhstan economic cooperation has achieved fruitful results, there are still hidden concerns about structural differences. The bilateral trade volume reached a record high of 43.8 billion US dollars in 2024, but Kazakhstan's exports to China still mainly consist of primary products such as energy, mineral resources and agricultural products. Although Kazakhstan is committed to expanding its exports of non-primary products to China and promoting export diversification, it is no easy task to change the existing trade structure in the short term.

Outlook: Focusing on resilience, Diversity and Sustainability: Despite challenges, the development prospects of China-Kazakhstan relations are generally bright and have a solid foundation for further quality improvement and upgrading. The two countries have designated 2025 to 2026 as the "Year of High-Quality Development of China-Central Asia Cooperation", which has pointed out the direction for the next stage of cooperation. Looking ahead, China-Kazakhstan relations will continue to foster new growth points in three major areas: green energy (such as wind power, photovoltaic power, hydrogen energy and smart grids), digital economy (such as AI and digital solutions), and cultural exchanges (such as visa-free policies driving tourism and educational cooperation).

4 Conclusion

Looking back on the development of China-Kazakhstan relations over the past more than three decades, its most remarkable achievement lies in the successful establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership framework based on a high degree of political mutual trust, deep economic complementarity and active cultural and people-to-people exchanges. This relationship has not only greatly promoted the common prosperity of the two countries, but also, with its constructiveness and openness, profoundly reshaped the balance of power in the Eurasian hinterland and driven the regional pattern towards a more balanced and multi-polar direction. However, standing at a new historical starting point, China-Kazakhstan relations are also confronted with practical challenges such as the intensification of major power competition, the improvement and upgrading of economic cooperation, and the equalization of internal interest distribution. Looking ahead, if China and Kazakhstan can continue to enhance strategic communication, focus on emerging areas such as green development and digital innovation, and constantly consolidate the foundation of interest integration and social recognition,

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