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GEOECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF KAZAKHSTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE SOUTH CAUCASUS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MIDDLE CORRIDOR

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Abstract. This article examines how geoeconomic factors associated with the development of the Middle Corridor have influenced Kazakhstan's foreign policy towards the South Caucasus between 2010 and 2025. Treating corridor-building as a structural shift in available connectivity options, the study conceptualises Kazakhstan's regional behaviour across two empirically traceable domains: connectivity diplomacy outputs (initiatives, agreements, and routinised consultations that enhance transit performance) and conflict positioning outputs (official narratives, legal framing, and diplomatic signalling regarding regional disputes). Using qualitative content analysis of secondary documentary sources, the article identifies key determinants shaping policy choice, including corridor efficiency and market access; infrastructure vulnerability and chokepoints; diversification and resilience objectives; stakeholder embedding across public-private and external partners; and institutional constraints that delimit feasible commitments. The findings show that corridor-driven interdependence intensifies Kazakhstan's engagement with transit nodes through pragmatic, performance-oriented diplomacy, while simultaneously encouraging cautious and legally framed positioning on Armenia-Azerbaijan tensions to avoid reputational and operational risks. These patterns are interpreted through multivector hedging and complex balancing, producing a domain-specific vector hierarchy in which corridor functionality is prioritised without implying wholesale political alignment. The study contributes an operationally grounded framework for linking geoeconomic connectivity to observable foreign-policy behaviour in a conflict-sensitive transit region.

Keywords: geoeconomics, geoeconomic determinants, Middle Corridor, Kazakhstan foreign policy, South Caucasus, connectivity diplomacy, conflict positioning, multivector foreign policy, hedging, complex balancing, vector hierarchy, transport corridors and connectivity

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Introduction

The South Caucasus has re-emerged as a strategic transit hinge between Central Asia and Europe. In this respect, the development of the Trans-Caspian route, commonly referred to as the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route), has materially altered the opportunity structure facing Kazakhstan. The corridor's capacity and utilisation have accelerated in recent years, with reported freight growth on the Middle Corridor and a parallel intensification of investment in "hard" infrastructure and "soft" facilitation measures such as customs harmonisation and the digitalisation of border procedures [1; 2; 3]. For Kazakhstan, connectivity is not a neutral technical matter. It is an enabling condition for diversified market access and a potential constraint when bottlenecks or political instability threaten continuity of flows. These dynamics make the South Caucasus region a key focus of Kazakhstan's external policy.

Contemporary scholarship on geoeconomics has emphasised that states increasingly pursue strategic objectives through economic and infrastructural instruments, including connectivity, market access, standards, and control over critical networks [4; 5].

Existing research on Kazakhstan's foreign policy has tended to prioritise great-power management, particularly Astana's balancing of relations with Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union, as well as its positioning within Eurasian regional institutions [6; 7; 8]. However, this literature leaves the ways in which corridor-centred interdependence shapes Kazakhstan's approach to smaller yet structurally important regions, such as the South Caucasus, under-specified.

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to explain the geoeconomic determinants of Kazakhstan's foreign policy towards the South Caucasus in the context of Middle Corridor development.

The study's scope is defined spatially and temporally. Geographically, it focuses on Kazakhstan's engagement with the South Caucasus, treating Azerbaijan and Armenia as a core dyad due to their centrality to corridor continuity and regional conflict dynamics, while Georgia and Turkey are incorporated as corridor nodes that materially condition Kazakh connectivity options. Temporally, the study focuses on 2010 - 2025, capturing the period in which trans-Caspian initiatives gained institutional form and later intensified amidst geopolitical disruptions and supply-chain reconfiguration.

Materials and Methods

Key concepts as analytic tools

Geoeconomics is used here in its mainstream analytical sense, referring to the strategic use of economic instruments, connectivity, infrastructure, market

access, and regulatory power to advance state interests, while recognising that such instruments often operate in the shadow of political competition [4; 5]. On this basis, geoeconomic determinants are defined as corridor-relevant economic and infrastructural drivers and constraints that shape Kazakhstan's foreign-policy preferences and trade-offs. The Middle Corridor is treated as a contextual structural change in connectivity options because it creates additional pathways to markets while simultaneously increasing reliance on specific nodes, routes, and governance arrangements [1; 2; 3].

Kazakhstan's foreign policy towards the South Caucasus is examined in two domains. The first is connectivity diplomacy, understood as the set of foreign-policy actions oriented towards building, upgrading, governing, and promoting transport, logistics, energy, and digital connectivity. This domain includes agreements, infrastructure investments, customs facilitation measures, and the creation of joint institutional routines [2; 3; 9]. The second is conflict positioning, which refers to Kazakhstan's public and diplomatic stance on regional disputes that affect corridor stability and risk. It includes neutrality, mediation offers, avoidance of blame, balanced engagement, and the framing of stability as a shared interest [8; 10].

Multivectorism and the adoption of conceptual lenses

The second pillar of the framework is multivectorism, Kazakhstan's long-standing foreign-policy orientation, originally associated with Nazarbayev's early post-independence doctrine and later reaffirmed as a pragmatic strategy for preserving autonomy in a complex regional environment [6; 7; 11].

To connect multivectorism to corridor-centred behaviour in the South Caucasus, the framework employs three conceptual lenses drawn from International Relations scholarship. First, hedging is used as a mechanism describing issue-splitting across domains and partners. It links determinants, such as vulnerability or institutional constraints, to outputs such as cautious conflict positioning and diversified connectivity diplomacy [6; 7]. Second, complex balancing is used to capture the broader logic of distributing engagement across multiple domains and actors without relying solely on military alignments. Third, vector hierarchy is treated not as a determinant but as a derived empirical outcome. Yuneman's study is instructive here because it shows that Kazakhstan's alignment behaviour can be traced through systematic indicators, suggesting that multivectorism may produce differentiated patterns across domains rather than uniform balancing across all directions [7]. In this study, hierarchy is therefore treated as an analytically modest claim: not as evidence of a wholesale foreign-policy realignment, but as evidence that some external directions may acquire greater functional priority within specific issue areas under changing geoeconomic conditions.

Analytical model: determinants, mechanisms, outputs, and outcomes

The framework distinguishes four analytical elements: determinants, mechanisms, outputs, and outcomes. To secure conceptual clarity, the study identifies five determinants that are explicitly geoeconomic and corridor-relevant. These determinants are designed to be traceable in documentary sources and to correspond closely to established constructs in the geoeconomics literature [4; 5], while remaining consistent with the autonomy-seeking logic of multivector foreign policy [6; 7; 11].

Determinant 1: market access and corridor efficiency. This captures how corridor development affects Kazakhstan's access to European and global markets by altering timing, cost, and reliability. It is grounded in the geoeconomic premise that connectivity structures trade opportunity and bargaining power [4]. In documentary material, it is traceable through emphasis on transit competitiveness, throughput growth, delivery times, and efforts to reduce border delays [2; 3].

Determinant 2: infrastructure dependence and chokepoint vulnerability. This captures exposure to disruption at specific nodes, including Caspian ports, ferry capacity, rail junctions, and border procedures. It corresponds to the geoeconomic claim that interdependence generates vulnerabilities that can become constraints or leverage points [4]. It appears through references to capacity bottlenecks, infrastructure reliability, and policy decisions allocating investment to critical nodes [3].

Determinant 3: diversification and corridor resilience as state objectives. This captures Kazakhstan's pursuit of redundancy and route diversification in order to reduce single-route vulnerability. It aligns with the multivector logic of avoiding dependence and the geoeconomic logic of resilience-building through multiple access pathways [4; 6]. It is reflected in infrastructure investments, agreements expanding alternative routes, and public framing of diversification as a strategic imperative [2; 9].

Determinant 4: stakeholder embedding and external investment. This captures the extent to which Kazakhstan's corridor policy is shaped by engagement with multiple external stakeholders, including the EU, Türkiye, China, and international financial institutions, whose involvement affects standards, financing, and political payoffs. It is grounded in the notion of enmeshment and in the logic of complex balancing, whereby embedding multiple actors can reduce coercion risks and expand strategic options [9; 12]. It appears through references to partnership platforms, joint projects, and multilateral support for corridor upgrades [9].

Determinant 5: institutional and compliance constraints in corridor governance. This captures how Kazakhstan's memberships, regulatory environment, and external obligations shape what it can credibly do, including in customs regimes, transport governance, and sanctions-related risk management.

It is grounded both in geoeconomic arguments that rules and standards are power-bearing structures and in multivector arguments that autonomy is pursued through careful management of constraints [4; 7; 8]. It is reflected in legalistic framing, emphasis on “technical” cooperation, and avoidance of escalatory language in public positioning.

Operationalisation and coding logic

The operationalisation strategy translates the above concepts into a set of coding rules suitable for qualitative content analysis of documentary sources. The analysis relies on a purposively selected documentary base consisting of official statements, selected state and policy documents, institutional reports, and factual materials used to contextualise corridor performance and diplomatic positioning [2; 3; 8; 9; 10; 14]. The purpose is not to construct an exhaustive archive of all relevant texts, but to assemble a focused body of material that makes it possible to compare recurring patterns of Kazakhstan’s behaviour across the two domains identified above.

The primary unit of analysis is the episode. An episode is defined here as a temporally bounded cluster of documents and policy actions linked either to a significant development in Middle Corridor governance and infrastructure or to a conflict-related event in the South Caucasus with implications for corridor stability. Episodes are selected through purposive sampling rather than exhaustive event collection. They are included when they generate observable corridor-relevant diplomatic or institutional activity by Kazakhstan, or when they require Kazakhstan to articulate a public position on a regional conflict affecting the corridor environment.

Coding proceeds in three stages. First, documents are coded for determinant signals. Second, each episode is coded separately for output behaviour in the two domains of connectivity diplomacy and conflict positioning. Third, cross-episode comparison is used to identify recurring combinations of determinants and outputs that are consistent with hedging or complex balancing. In this way, mechanisms are not inferred from isolated rhetorical cues, but from repeated co-occurrence across documents, episodes, and domains.

Determinant signals are coded when texts explicitly reference market access, transit competitiveness, route efficiency, bottlenecks, vulnerability, diversification, resilience, investment attraction, stakeholder platforms, standards, or compliance constraints [2; 3; 9]. Connectivity diplomacy outputs are coded when the documentary record contains agreements, joint projects, infrastructure investments, customs facilitation measures, and institutional routines focused on corridor development [2; 3]. Conflict positioning outputs are coded when statements display neutrality, mediation offers, avoidance of blame, balanced engagement cues, or explicit references to stability and peaceful settlement [8; 10].

Hedging is coded when evidence shows issue-splitting, such as simultaneous corridor deepening with a partner and rhetorical restraint in conflict discussions, or the pursuit of alternative routes to reduce dependence while maintaining formal cooperation with existing route providers [6; 7]. Complex balancing is coded when evidence indicates diversification across partners and institutions intended to prevent dominance by any single actor, for example simultaneous engagement with Turkic formats, Western connectivity agendas, and Chinese investment frameworks [6; 11; 12].

Finally, the framework specifies how vector hierarchy is assessed. It is not coded from a single document. Rather, it is inferred from repeated patterns across the documentary base, such as persistent prioritisation of corridor-node partners in connectivity diplomacy, sustained asymmetry in the density of agreements and high-level engagements, and recurrent preference for forms of functional cooperation that protect corridor interests under heightened conflict risk. Yuneman's approach to tracing prioritisation patterns through systematic evidence provides methodological support for treating hierarchy as an empirical outcome rather than a doctrinal claim [7].

At the same time, the study does not claim to reconstruct decision-making motives in a strict causal sense, nor does it treat official discourse as a transparent reflection of underlying preferences. Instead, it examines observable patterns of external behaviour and justificatory framing in order to assess whether corridor-related geoeconomic determinants are associated with differentiated foreign-policy outputs. The findings should therefore be read as evidence of domain-specific prioritisation rather than proof of a broader strategic reorientation of Kazakhstan's foreign policy.

Empirical Analysis

The empirical analysis proceeds from a simple but consequential premise: for Kazakhstan, the South Caucasus matters not primarily as a neighbourhood in the conventional sense, but as a functional hinge connecting Caspian transit to access to European markets. The Middle Corridor depends on a chain of interlocking nodes that lie outside Kazakhstan's territory yet have become increasingly important to Kazakhstan's economic statecraft. In practical terms, the route links rail and road infrastructure across Kazakhstan to Caspian maritime crossings, and from there to Azerbaijan's rail network and onward through Georgia and Türkiye into European logistics systems. This physical architecture turns the South Caucasus into a geopolitical and geoeconomic hinge: without predictable transit through Azerbaijan and Georgia, Kazakhstan's westward connectivity remains structurally exposed to pressure on alternative routes.

Empirically, the analysis is organised as a structured comparison of episodes rather than as a continuous narrative. The objective is not to provide a comprehensive chronology of Kazakhstan's relations with the South Caucasus,

but to examine whether recurring geoeconomic determinants are associated with stable patterns of behaviour across the two domains identified above. This makes it possible to compare corridor-related activism with conflict-related restraint within a common analytical framework.

Corridor salience appears in three recurrent forms: first, as an emphasis on throughput, speed, and reliability metrics used to justify investment and regulatory coordination; second, as a language of vulnerability that frames connectivity as a security-adjacent concern; and third, as an explicit policy rationale linking corridor development to autonomy, diversification, and strategic optionality. In 2024, for instance, the reported 62 per cent increase in freight traffic along the Middle Corridor to around 4.5 million tonnes, together with the sharp growth in containerised volumes, was repeatedly used by corridor stakeholders and observers as evidence that the route was becoming a more serious alternative within reconfigured Eurasian supply chains [13; 14].

The conflict environment of the South Caucasus is treated here as a corridor risk factor. Kazakhstan's relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan are therefore approached as a dual-domain policy space. On the one hand, Kazakhstan pursues connectivity diplomacy through agreements, coordination formats, and infrastructure investments. On the other hand, it articulates conflict positioning through carefully calibrated statements, avoidance of blame, and support for dialogue, often framed in legalistic language that enables balanced engagement.

OECD analysis of the Trans-Caspian corridor, for example, notes that volumes increased markedly while also underlining persistent capacity gaps and coordination bottlenecks that continue to limit reliability [14].

Results and Discussion

Geoeconomic determinants of Kazakhstan's policy towards the South Caucasus

Determinants are treated as empirically observable drivers and constraints that appear in documentary records and that can reasonably be linked to foreign-policy outputs. They are not “mechanisms” in themselves, but structured pressures and incentives that make certain policies more likely, and others more costly.

A first determinant is market access and corridor efficiency. OECD reporting frames this in terms of competitiveness and performance constraints: traffic growth is significant, but coordination failures and infrastructure bottlenecks prevent the corridor from reaching its potential [14]. Efficiency, therefore, drives Kazakhstan to prioritise policy tools that reduce dwell times and transaction costs, including tariff harmonisation, joint operators, and digitised corridor governance.

A second determinant is infrastructure dependence and chokepoint vulnerability. Vulnerability also appears in energy export diversification: Kazakhstan repeatedly reroutes additional volumes via BTC after CPC

infrastructure disruptions, but this rerouting is constrained by port capacity and operational limitations [15].

A third determinant is diversification and corridor resilience as state objectives. The effort to increase shipments via BTC, even if still modest in overall export shares, is repeatedly justified as route diversification and risk management [16; 17]. Resilience thus compels Kazakhstan to invest political capital in corridor governance and cultivate functional partnerships with transit states.

A fourth determinant is stakeholder embedding and external investment. For example, reporting in late 2025 describes expanded cooperation among Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia with Chinese railway container operators, pointing towards a deliberate effort to stabilise and scale corridor flows through multi-actor coordination [18].

A fifth determinant is institutional and compliance constraints in corridor governance. Reuters reporting on Kazakhstan's navigation of sanctions pressures and rerouting after disruptions illustrates how compliance and infrastructure vulnerability become mutually reinforcing determinants in practice [15].

Connectivity diplomacy outputs

Outputs are coded as formalised commitments and routinised practices: agreements, joint ventures, tariff and logistics coordination, regulatory harmonisation, investment decisions, and recurring high-level formats that institutionalise corridor cooperation.

A central output is the institutionalisation of corridor governance through joint logistics structures. The June 2023 decision by Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to establish a joint logistics company designed to unify tariffs and streamline cargo handling is a particularly clear example. Joint operators and unified tariff policies translate corridor salience into administrative capacity and embed partners into a shared performance logic in which unilateral deviations become costlier and corridor governance more institutionally resilient.

A second output is the routine production of corridor performance narratives in official settings, which function as political justifications for policy intensification. Statements by Kazakhstan's leadership and government communications repeatedly reference traffic growth and target-setting, framing corridor development as a strategic programme rather than an ad hoc project [13; 19].

A third output is corridor-related investment and asset positioning in the South Caucasus. Kazakhstan's ownership and management of infrastructure assets in Georgia, particularly through KazTransOil's ownership of Batumi Oil Terminal, is a significant indicator of corridor-linked stakeholder embedding. By holding assets along the route, Kazakhstan reduces dependence on purely external operators and can better manage the risks of disruption or discriminatory access.

A fourth output concerns energy route diversification through Azerbaijan, notably via the BTC pipeline. Reporting across 2024-2025 indicates agreements to increase transit of Kazakh oil through Azerbaijan and via BTC, including phased expansion arrangements and stated targets to raise volumes [16; 17]. Reuters reporting links BTC shipments to disruptions affecting CPC and details the practical constraints that Kazakhstan is attempting to overcome through port upgrades and expanded terminals [15; 20].

Conflict positioning outputs

Conflict positioning outputs are coded as Kazakhstan's public statements, diplomatic behaviour, and recurrent rhetorical patterns related to Armenia-Azerbaijan tensions and regional security episodes that could affect corridor stability.

Kazakhstan's official statements during the escalation of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict in September 2020 illustrate a baseline pattern. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) expressed concern, urged cessation of hostilities, and emphasised the importance of peaceful settlement through political and diplomatic means [21]. Later episodes show similar patterns: official statements and communications in subsequent escalations, and Kazakhstan's reactions to developments in peace negotiations, reproduce the same repertoire: support for constructive dialogue, emphasis on peaceful resolution, and endorsement of steps towards agreements [22]. When Kazakhstan welcomed announcements that Armenia and Azerbaijan had concluded negotiations on the draft peace agreement in March 2025, the language again stressed support for settlement and constructive dialogue rather than attributing blame [23]. The consistency of these outputs suggests that Kazakhstan seek to reduce the corridor's exposure to conflict risk not by intervening directly, but by maintaining equidistance and encouraging institutionalised settlement.

Conflict positioning is not a domain of complete neutrality in all respects. Kazakhstan's diplomatic practice shows a preference for principles that align with its sovereignty concerns, most notably territorial integrity. The South Caucasus conflict environment intersects with Kazakhstan's broader sensitivity to separatism and territorial revisionism, shaping how its statements are understood even when they remain formally balanced.

Conflict positioning is also evident in Kazakhstan's willingness to maintain bilateral relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, even when tensions are high. This includes continued diplomatic engagement, participation in multilateral settings where both parties are present, and avoidance of actions that would force binary choices. In a corridor context, such restraint is itself a policy output, reflecting a deliberate decision to prevent the South Caucasus relationship from becoming hostage to security polarisation.

Hedging

Within the conceptual framework established in Theoretical and Conceptual Framework of the Study part, hedging is treated as an observable pattern of issue-splitting and risk-spreading across domains. In the present case, hedging is expected to manifest as the combination of active connectivity diplomacy with cautious conflict positioning: Kazakhstan invests and coordinates intensely on corridor matters, while keeping its conflict language restrained and its diplomatic engagement balanced (See Table 1).

Table 1. Comparative analysis of Kazakhstan's foreign policy domains in the South Caucasus

Domain	Nature of actions and logic	Empirical examples (Outputs)
Connectivity Domain	Active and proactive: Investment in 'hard' infrastructure and creation of an institutional framework for corridor management.	- Creation of a joint logistics company by Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Georgia to unify tariffs. - Direct management of assets through the oil terminal in Batumi. - Expansion of port capacities in Aktau and Kuryk.
Conflict Domain	Cautious and procedural: Use of legal formalism and maintaining equidistance (equal distance) from the parties to the conflict.	- 2020 MFA statement: call for peaceful settlement without taking sides. - Support for the principle of territorial integrity while maintaining dialogue with both sides. - Approval of progress in peace talks in 2025 without attribution of blame.

Source: *Table 1 compiled by the authors.*

The empirical record is broadly consistent with this expectation. The outputs of connectivity diplomacy discussed above show increasing functional alignment with corridor nodes, especially Azerbaijan and Georgia, through joint logistics governance and expanded energy transit arrangements [16; 24]. At the same time, Kazakhstan's conflict positioning remains framed around restraint and dialogue, as illustrated by MFA statements in 2020 and later supportive reactions to peace process developments [21; 23].

Hedging is further reinforced by the way Kazakhstan narrates corridor development as diversification rather than confrontation. Official and policy-oriented sources repeatedly frame the Middle Corridor as an alternative route that enhances resilience, not as a hostile bypass designed to undermine any actor. OECD analysis and reporting on corridor performance emphasise competitiveness, bottlenecks, and capacity constraints rather than geopolitical signalling [14]. This framing supports hedging because it allows Kazakhstan to present corridor investment as a functional economic policy even when it has the practical effect of reducing reliance on northern routes.

A crucial empirical test of hedging is crisis behaviour under pressure. Reuters reporting on CPC disruptions and the subsequent rerouting of oil exports provides an instructive example: Kazakhstan increases BTC shipments as a practical diversification response, while continuing to manage relationships across multiple vectors and to navigate constraints on port capacity and market requirements [15]. Such episodes show hedging as operational risk management rather than mere rhetorical positioning. Kazakhstan does not abruptly abandon existing routes; instead, it incrementally strengthens alternatives and uses them as contingency capacity.

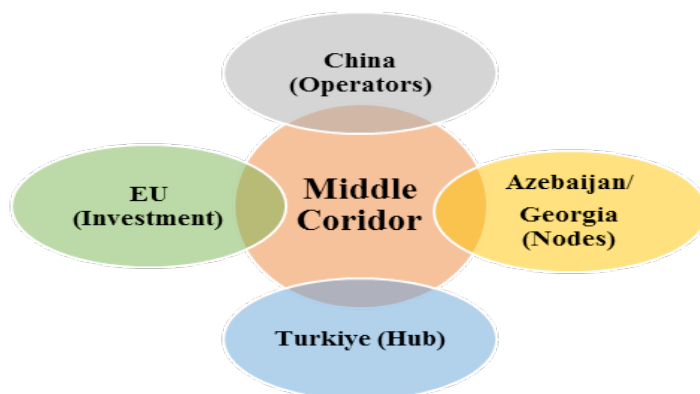
Complex balancing

Where hedging emphasises issue-splitting and insurance, complex balancing captures Kazakhstan's broader strategy of distributing influence and dependence across multiple partners and institutional settings. In the context of the Middle Corridor, this is visible in Kazakhstan's simultaneous cultivation of corridor partners such as Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye, engagement with external stakeholders including China and European actors, and continued participation in wider Eurasian institutional frameworks.

The Middle Corridor is not simply a bilateral Kazakh-Azerbaijani project. It operates as a broader ecosystem that links Chinese rail container transit, South Caucasus transit nodes, Turkish logistical integration, and European market demand. Reporting that Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia expanded cooperation with Chinese railway container transport actors in 2025 suggests an effort to stabilise corridor flows by embedding major external stakeholders into corridor development and governance [25]. At the same time, OECD analysis indicates growing European attention to the corridor's competitiveness, efficiency, and bottlenecks [26]. Taken together, these dynamics suggest that Kazakhstan is not relying on a single partnership model, but is instead widening the corridor's stakeholder base in ways that reduce the risk of domination by any one actor.

Figure 1 helps illustrate this shift from largely bilateral interaction to a more multilateral pattern of risk management. The corridor is becoming not only a transport route, but also a space of intersecting commercial, regulatory, and strategic interests. The involvement of actors such as China, through container transit, and the EU, through investment and standards-related influence, reflects a logic of omni-enmeshment. In practice, this broadens the number of stakeholders with an interest in corridor performance and makes monopoly control over the route more difficult.

Figure 1 – Stakeholder ecology and the mechanism of complex balancing in the Middle Corridor



Source: *Figure 1 compiled by the authors.*

Complex balancing is also visible in the use of political and institutional platforms that reinforce connectivity themes. Kazakhstan's participation in Turkic cooperation frameworks provides a symbolic and organisational setting in which cooperation with Azerbaijan and Türkiye can be presented as economically and regionally legitimate rather than overtly antagonistic [25]. At the same time, Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy Concept for 2020-2030 continues to emphasise balanced relations and diversified partnerships, providing a doctrinal anchor for interpreting corridor intensification as an adaptation within multivectorism rather than a departure from it [26]. In this sense, the coexistence of doctrinal balance and corridor activism suggests a pattern of complex balancing: Kazakhstan increases emphasis on new directions and capabilities without formally abandoning existing alignments.

A further dimension concerns asset control and infrastructural positioning. The case of the Batumi Oil Terminal is illustrative. By owning and managing terminal assets in Georgia, Kazakhstan strengthens its ability to operate within the corridor with a greater degree of autonomy from exclusively external operational control [27]. In geoeconomic terms, this can be read as a balancing move: it reduces exposure to external leverage and makes corridor access less dependent on political goodwill alone.

Vector hierarchy

The concept of vector hierarchy is analytically useful, but it requires careful handling in order to avoid treating temporary emphasis as evidence of durable alignment. In the context of the Middle Corridor, the available evidence suggests that the South Caucasus-Türkiye vector has gained greater functional weight in connectivity-related domains, particularly since 2022. This is visible in the intensification of agreements, the creation of joint operators, the articulation of series "INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS and REGIONAL STUDIES" 1 (63) 2026

expansion targets, and the growth of energy transit via Azerbaijan [16; 25; 26]. Such outputs suggest that Kazakhstan is assigning greater importance to corridor-node relationships for specific practical purposes. At the same time, this does not by itself imply broader political alignment. Kazakhstan's conflict positioning remains cautious and balanced, while its policy language continues to emphasise autonomy and multivectorism as general principles [21; 26].

In this study, hierarchy is assessed through two observable dimensions. The first is resource and attention allocation in connectivity diplomacy. Increased high-level engagement, expanded corridor-governance formats, and repeated investment narratives indicate a pattern of functional prioritisation. The second is discursive prominence. Official speeches and policy documents increasingly present Trans-Caspian connectivity as central to Kazakhstan's economic strategy, especially in the context of uncertainty surrounding the northern route [14]. At the same time, this hierarchy remains constrained. Reuters reporting notes that, even as Kazakhstan increases BTC exports, the bulk of oil exports still moves through the CPC route, suggesting that diversification remains partial and that any reorientation is limited by infrastructure and market realities [20].

The main analytical conclusion, therefore, is that vector hierarchy in this case is best understood as domain-specific upgrading. The evidence indicates that Kazakhstan has elevated the South Caucasus-Türkiye vector within the connectivity domain, while preserving balanced engagement in the conflict domain and maintaining broader multivector commitments. Rather than signalling abandonment of multivectorism, this pattern is more plausibly interpreted as differentiated prioritisation across issue areas under changing.

Episode-based comparison

To bring together the analytical dimensions used in the empirical section, the study employs an episode-based comparison. The selected episodes are not intended to provide an exhaustive chronology of Kazakhstan's relations with the South Caucasus. Rather, they capture moments in which corridor-relevant geoeconomic determinants became especially visible in policy behaviour, either through intensified connectivity diplomacy or through conflict-related positioning. This makes it possible to compare how similar structural pressures generate different external-policy outputs across the two domains.

Episode 1: Corridor institutionalisation and functional anchoring (2010s-2017).

During this period, Kazakhstan's corridor orientation developed from strategic intent into more tangible assets and route capacity. The significance of the episode lies less in any single agreement than in the gradual construction of functional dependencies. The acquisition and management of assets such as the Batumi Oil Terminal, culminating in formalised ownership structures by 2017, suggests early recognition that corridor access required embedded infrastructural

positions rather than reliance on diplomatic goodwill alone [27]. This episode is best coded as stakeholder embedding and resilience-building, in that it created a material basis for later intensification. The regional conflict environment remained largely in the background, and Kazakhstan's multivector logic did not yet require visible recalibration.

Episode 2: The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and the activation of conflict-positioning routines.

The September 2020 escalation tested Kazakhstan's balancing practice under conditions of regional instability. The MFA statement expressing concern, urging the cessation of hostilities, and emphasising peaceful settlement represents a typical conflict-positioning output aimed at preserving relations with both parties while signalling sensitivity to instability [21]. In coding terms, the relevant determinant is vulnerability: conflict is framed as destabilising, but Kazakhstan's response takes the form of rhetorical restraint rather than intervention. Hedging is visible in the separation between conflict language and corridor policy. Kazakhstan neither suspends corridor cooperation nor adopts a confrontational stance that might endanger longer-term functional partnerships.

Episode 3: Post-2022 acceleration of corridor salience and institutional deepening.

The post-2022 context functions as a structural accelerator. Corridor volumes increased substantially and became a prominent metric in official and analytical narratives [13; 14]. In response, Kazakhstan and its corridor partners intensified coordination, including the establishment of joint logistics structures designed to unify tariffs and streamline cargo handling [24]. This episode is best coded as a convergence of several determinants: market access, efficiency, vulnerability, and resilience all appear in documentary rationales for policy intensification. Complex balancing becomes more visible as Kazakhstan seeks to widen the corridor's stakeholder base, including through engagement with Chinese container transport actors [18]. The episode therefore illustrates not only intensified connectivity diplomacy, but also a broader effort to embed the corridor within multiple external relationships.

Episode 4: Energy diversification through BTC under infrastructure disruptions (2024-2025).

This episode shows how corridor logic extends into the energy domain and how vulnerability can induce practical diversification. Kazakhstan's phased agreements to increase oil transit through Azerbaijan and via BTC, together with official plans and targets for expanded volumes, demonstrate corridor diplomacy in a strategically important sector [16; 17]. Reuters reporting further indicates that disruptions affecting CPC can trigger short-term rerouting decisions and that Kazakhstan uses BTC as an alternative route, although this option remains constrained by port capacity and operational limits [15; 20]. The episode

highlights the determinant of chokepoint vulnerability and the output of route diversification. Hedging is visible in Kazakhstan's use of BTC as an incremental supplement rather than a wholesale replacement, thereby preserving flexibility across vectors.

Episode 5: Peace process developments and Kazakhstan's diplomatic reassurance (2025).

Kazakhstan's positive response to signs of progress on a draft peace agreement reflects a consistent conflict-positioning repertoire: support for constructive dialogue without polarising attribution [23]. This episode is coded primarily as a conflict-positioning output and is again consistent with hedging. Kazakhstan signals an interest in regional stability, which is favourable for corridor reliability, while maintaining balanced language. If increased corridor salience had produced overt political alignment, one might expect sharper rhetorical differentiation. Instead, Kazakhstan sustains procedural neutrality, which remains consistent with both multivectorism and hedging.

Across these episodes, the emerging pattern is one of node-driven asymmetry rather than political bandwagoning. Kazakhstan's connectivity diplomacy is most intense with corridor nodes, especially Azerbaijan and Georgia, because geoeconomic determinants make these relationships structurally important. At the same time, Kazakhstan's conflict positioning remains cautious and broadly even-handed, reflecting the need to preserve room for manoeuvre in a region where security crises can generate reputational, diplomatic, and institutional costs. The resulting vector hierarchy is therefore best understood as a functional hierarchy within connectivity diplomacy, anchored in efficiency, resilience, and vulnerability reduction, rather than as evidence of a broader reorientation of Kazakhstan's foreign policy.

Conclusion

This study set out to explain how geoeconomic determinants linked to the Middle Corridor shape Kazakhstan's foreign policy towards the South Caucasus and how these determinants interact with the logic of multivector diplomacy. The analysis suggests that corridor development does not merely add an economic layer to Kazakhstan's regional engagement. Rather, it changes the configuration of incentives and constraints within which foreign policy is formulated and implemented. As Kazakhstan's westward connectivity becomes increasingly mediated by external nodes in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye, the South Caucasus emerges as a strategically important hinge where transport performance, investment security, and political stability become closely interconnected. In this context, corridor politics acquire a clearer foreign policy dimension. They require sustained diplomatic coordination, institutional adaptation, and calibrated signalling under conditions in which conflict risk cannot be treated as external to connectivity.

The analysis identified five determinants that are most consistently visible in the documentary record and most directly related to corridor development. These are market access and efficiency imperatives, infrastructural dependence and chokepoint vulnerability, diversification and resilience as explicit state objectives, stakeholder embedding as a means of widening options and reducing coercion risk, and institutional constraints that delimit manoeuvring space while also providing tools for functional autonomy. These determinants are useful analytically because they translate a general claim, namely that Kazakhstan pursues connectivity, into a set of more specific and traceable expectations about behaviour. Corridor dependence is not expressed mainly through declaratory geopolitics. It is more clearly visible in investments in capacity, efforts to harmonise procedures, the creation of joint governance arrangements, and the prioritisation of reliability as a strategic objective.

Against this determinant structure, Kazakhstan's regional behaviour is most plausibly captured through the dual domain approach used throughout the paper. First, the pattern of connectivity diplomacy shows clear intensification. Kazakhstan's engagement with corridor nodes has become more institutionalised through routinised formats, coordination initiatives, and tangible asset positioning along the route. The policy logic is broadly functional, namely to improve corridor performance and reduce the political and commercial costs of disruption. Second, Kazakhstan's conflict positioning remains consistently cautious. The dominant repertoire is legalistic and procedural, emphasising restraint, dialogue, and settlement while avoiding forms of attribution that could foreclose relationships or raise the reputational costs of corridor cooperation. This division is not accidental. It reflects the fact that corridor development increases the salience of regional stability without turning Kazakhstan into a security arbiter in the South Caucasus.

Interpreted through the lens of multivectorism, these findings are more consistent with hedging and complex balancing than with straightforward balancing or bandwagoning. Hedging appears in issue splitting across domains. Kazakhstan can pursue active corridor cooperation with key nodes while retaining discursive and diplomatic caution on conflict related matters. Complex balancing is visible in efforts to avoid single partner dependence by embedding multiple stakeholders and cultivating overlapping institutional pathways, thereby widening options and reducing exposure to leverage. At the same time, these patterns do not imply a linear or unidirectional alignment. The evidence is more consistent with a bounded, domain specific vector hierarchy. In connectivity and trade facilitation, the South Caucasus and Türkiye vector appears to have gained greater functional priority because it has become increasingly important for corridor performance. Yet this upgrading remains constrained and does not amount to a wholesale reordering of Kazakhstan's wider multivector posture.

The hierarchy observed here is therefore functional rather than ideological, since it reflects the distribution of material constraints and opportunities across issue areas.

The study also helps clarify the role of crisis pressure. Episodes of heightened uncertainty tend to sharpen the tradeoff between corridor continuity and political positioning. Under such conditions, Kazakhstan's response is not to abandon multivectorism, but to practise it more visibly, deepening functional cooperation where doing so strengthens resilience, while maintaining rhetorical restraint where polarisation would impose significant costs. This suggests that corridor development may increase interdependence with specific nodes without deterministically capturing foreign policy. Interdependence generates constraints, but it can also provide instruments for managing them, especially when institutionalised cooperation lowers coordination costs and reduces the risks of unilateral disruption.

Empirically, the findings suggest that Kazakhstan's South Caucasus policy is better understood as a corridor conditioned policy space rather than solely as an extension of great power management. Conceptually, the article shows the value of specifying geoeconomic determinants and linking them to observable policy outputs, thereby avoiding a reduction of connectivity to either pure economics or pure geopolitics. Methodologically, the study indicates that qualitative documentary analysis can identify meaningful regularities in policy behaviour when guided by explicit operational criteria and by a distinction between functional outputs and conflict positioning. At the same time, the conclusions should be read with appropriate caution. The analysis identifies patterned associations in documentary evidence rather than direct proof of decision-making motives. A productive direction for future research would be to expand the episode set and incorporate additional corridor stakeholders and sectoral domains, including digital trade facilitation and green logistics, in order to assess whether the observed vector hierarchy remains stable or becomes more pronounced as corridor capacity expands.

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ОРТА ДӘЛІЗДІҢ ДАМУЫ ЖАҒДАЙЫНДАҒЫ ҚАЗАҚСТАННЫҢ ОҢТҮСТІК КАВКАЗҒА ҚАТЫСТЫ СЫРТҚЫ САЯСАТЫНЫҢ ГЕОЭКОНОМИКАЛЫҚ ДЕТЕРМИНАНТТАРЫ

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Аңдатпа. Бұл мақалада Орта Дәліздің дамуына байланысты геоэкономикалық факторлардың Қазақстанның 2010-2025 жылдар

аралығындағы Оңтүстік Кавказға қатысты сыртқы саясатына қалай әсер еткені қарастырылады. Дәліз құрылысын қол жетімді қосылу мүмкіндіктерінің құрылымдық өзгерісі ретінде қарастыра отырып, зерттеу қазақстанның екі эмпирикалық бақыланатын саладағы аймақтық мінез-құлқын тұжырымдайды: байланыс саласындағы дипломатияның нәтижелері (бастамалар, келісімдер және транзиттің тиімділігін арттыратын жоспарлы консультациялар) және қақтығыстарды реттеудің нәтижелері (ресми баяндау, құқықтық негіздеу және аймақтық дауларға қатысты дипломатиялық сигналдар). Қосымша деректі дереккөздердің мазмұнын сапалы талдауды пайдалана отырып, мақалада дәліздердің тиімділігі мен нарықтарға қолжетімділікті қоса алғанда, саясатты тандауды қалыптастыратын негізгі детерминанттар анықталған; инфрақұрылымның осалдығы мен кедергілері; әртараптандыру және өміршендік мақсаттары; мүдделі тараптарды мемлекеттік–жекеменшік және сыртқы серіктестерге енгізу; және мүмкін болатын міндеттемелерді шектейтін институционалдық шектеулер. Нәтижелер дәліздерге негізделген өзара тәуелділік Қазақстанның прагматикалық, тиімділікке бағытталған дипломатия арқылы транзиттік тораптармен өзара әрекеттесуін күшейтетінін көрсетеді, сонымен бірге беделді және операциялық тәуекелдерді болдырмау үшін Армян-Әзірбайжан шиеленістеріне қатысты сақтықпен және заңды түрде тұжырымдалған ұстанымдарды ынталандырады. Бұл заңдылықтар көпвекторлы хеджирлеу және күрделі тендестіру арқылы түсіндіріледі, бұл белгілі бір доменге тән векторлық иерархияны тудырады, онда дәліздің функционалдығы жалпы саяси келісімді білдірмей басымдыққа ие болады. Зерттеу геоэкономикалық байланыстарды қақтығыстарға сезімтал транзиттік аймақтағы бақыланатын сыртқы саяси мінез-құлықпен байланыстыру үшін операциялық негізделген негіз құруға ықпал етеді.

Тірек сөздер: геоэкономика, геоэкономикалық детерминанттар, Орта Дәліз, Қазақстанның сыртқы саясаты, Оңтүстік Кавказ, байланыс дипломатиясы, қақтығыстарды реттеу, көпвекторлы сыртқы саясат, хеджирлеу, кешенді теңгерімдеу, векторлық иерархия, көлік дәліздері және байланыс

Қаржыланжыру: ғылыми мақала Қазақстан Республикасының Ғылым және жоғары білім министрлігі тарапынан «AP22788787 – Қазақстанның ұлттық мүдделерін қамтамасыз ету жағдайында халықаралық Транскаспий бағытын іске асырудың сын-қатерлері мен мүмкіндіктері» гранты аясында қаржыландырылды.

ГЕОЭКОНОМИЧЕСКИЕ ДЕТЕРМИНАНТЫ ВНЕШНЕЙ ПОЛИТИКИ КАЗАХСТАНА В ОТНОШЕНИИ ЮЖНОГО КАВКАЗА В КОНТЕКСТЕ РАЗВИТИЯ СРЕДИННОГО КОРИДОРА

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Аннотация. В данной статье рассматривается, как геоэкономические факторы, связанные с развитием Среднего коридора, повлияли на внешнюю политику Казахстана в отношении Южного Кавказа в период с 2010 по 2025 год. Рассматривая создание коридоров как структурный сдвиг в доступных вариантах подключения, авторы исследования концептуализируют региональное поведение Казахстана в двух эмпирически прослеживаемых областях: результаты дипломатии подключения (инициативы, соглашения и регулярные консультации, которые повышают эффективность транзита) и результаты позиционирования в конфликтах (официальные заявления, правовое оформление и дипломатические сигналы в отношении региональных споров). Используя качественный контент-анализ вторичных документальных источников, в статье определены ключевые факторы, определяющие выбор политики, включая эффективность коридоров и доступ к рынкам; уязвимость инфраструктуры и узкие места; цели диверсификации и устойчивости; участие заинтересованных сторон в рамках государственно-частного партнерства и внешних партнеров; и институциональные ограничения, которые ограничивают выполнимые обязательства. Полученные результаты показывают, что взаимозависимость, обусловленная коридорами, усиливает взаимодействие Казахстана с транзитными узлами посредством прагматичной, ориентированной на результат дипломатии, одновременно поощряя осторожное и юридически оформленное позиционирование в отношении напряженности в отношениях между Арменией и Азербайджаном во избежание репутационных и операционных рисков. Эти закономерности интерпретируются с помощью многовекторного хеджирования и сложного балансирования, создавая векторную иерархию, специфичную для конкретной области, в которой функциональность коридора является приоритетной, не подразумевая общего политического согласования. Исследование представляет собой практическую основу для увязки геоэкономических связей с наблюдаемым внешнеполитическим поведением в чувствительном к конфликтам транзитном регионе.

Ключевые слова: геоэкономика, геоэкономические детерминанты, Средний коридор, внешняя политика Казахстана, Южный Кавказ, диплома-

тия взаимосвязанности, позиционирование в конфликтах, многовекторная внешняя политика, хеджирование, комплексное балансирование, векторная иерархия, транспортные коридоры и связность

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