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# CHINA IN KAZAKHSTAN'S MULTI-VECTOR FOREIGN POLICY: THE CONTENT AND FEATURES OF THE "PERMANENT COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP"

***Arai Zhuparkhan***
Astana International University, Astana, Kazakhstan

**Arai Zhuparkhan** — 1st-year master's student of the educational programme "International Relations", Astana International University, Astana, Kazakhstan.

**Scientific supervisor:** Sanzhar Makhammaduly — PhD, Acting Associate Professor, Astana International University, Astana, Kazakhstan.

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**Abstract:** In 2019 Astana and Beijing raised their relationship to a level described by the formula of a "permanent comprehensive strategic partnership"; this article asks what this formula contains in practice and how it fits into the multi-vector diplomacy of Kazakhstan. The study uses qualitative content analysis of bilateral joint statements and the Foreign Policy Concept of Kazakhstan for 2020–2030, together with historical-comparative and institutional analysis. The results show that the partnership rests on four pillars: institutionalised political trust, economic and connectivity cooperation linked to the alignment of "Nurly Zhol" with the Belt and Road Initiative, security cooperation and people-to-people ties. Its distinctive features are a long-term time horizon, a multi-level institutional architecture and non-exclusivity, which make it compatible with Kazakhstan's balanced relations with other major partners. The author argues that Astana uses the partnership as a hedging tool that widens its options, not as a step towards alignment with Beijing.

**Keywords:** Kazakhstan, China, multi-vector foreign policy, permanent comprehensive strategic partnership, Belt and Road Initiative, hedging, Central Asia.

## Introduction

Since gaining independence, Kazakhstan has had to build its foreign policy in a demanding geographical setting. The country is landlocked, borders two great powers – Russia and China – along thousands of kilometres, and depends on external markets for the export of its energy and mineral resources. Under these conditions, the leadership in Astana chose a multi-vector course: the simultaneous development of constructive relations with all major centres of power without joining any of them against others [1; 2]. Within this course, the Chinese direction has gradually moved from the periphery to the centre of Kazakhstan's diplomatic agenda.

The turning point came in September 2019, when the two heads of state agreed to develop a "permanent comprehensive strategic partnership". Even in China's extensive vocabulary of partnerships this wording stands out. Two puzzles follow from it. If the relationship was already "comprehensive" and "strategic" before 2019, what did the added word change? And how can a country that refuses exclusive commitments accept a label that sounds like a lifelong pledge? Scholars have paid little attention to either puzzle. Existing studies tend either to describe bilateral cooperation sector by sector [3; 4] or to analyse Chinese influence in Central Asia as a whole [5; 6].

Much less has been written about the conceptual content of the partnership label itself as seen from the Kazakhstani side.

The aim of this article is to identify the content and distinctive features of the permanent comprehensive strategic partnership and to define its role in Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy. To achieve this aim, the study addresses three tasks: first, to locate the Chinese direction within the official foreign-policy framework of Kazakhstan; second, to trace the stages through which the relationship reached its current status; and third, to systematise the main components of the partnership and the features that set it apart from earlier stages. The novelty of the study lies in treating the partnership formula not as a diplomatic slogan but as a structured set of commitments, and in interpreting it through the lens of hedging behaviour typical of secondary states.

**Materials and Methods**

The source base of the study consists of three groups of materials. The first group includes official documents: joint statements of Kazakhstan and China adopted in 2019 and 2022, the Foreign Policy Concept of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020–2030 [7] and public speeches of the leaders of both countries. The second group comprises academic works by Kazakhstani, Chinese and Western scholars on Kazakhstan's foreign policy, China's partnership diplomacy and Central Asian regional politics. The third group consists of analytical materials of research centres and statistical data used to illustrate trends.

The methodological basis combines several approaches. Qualitative content analysis was applied to the official documents in order to identify recurring commitments, key terms and the areas of cooperation that the parties themselves consider priorities. The historical-comparative method made it possible to compare the wording and substance of the partnership at successive stages. Institutional analysis was used to map the mechanisms through which cooperation is carried out. The theoretical framework draws on the concept of strategic partnership as a flexible, goal-oriented form of cooperation that differs from a formal alliance [8; 9] and on the concept of hedging, understood as a strategy by which a smaller state keeps several options open in its relations with stronger powers [10].

**Results and Discussion**

**1. The Chinese direction in Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy**

Multi-vectorism in Kazakhstan has never meant equal distance from all partners. Rather, it is a hierarchy of priorities that is adjusted according to national interests. In the Foreign Policy Concept for 2020–2030, China appears in the same priority group as Russia, the Central Asian states, the United States and the European Union [7]. With regard to Beijing, the Concept speaks of deepening the existing partnership and broadening economic, transport and humanitarian links. In other words, at the level of official doctrine China is treated as a key, but not exclusive, partner.

Several structural factors explain this position. The first is geography: the long common border and the absence of direct access to the sea make China both an immediate neighbour whose stability matters for Kazakhstan's security and a natural outlet to the Asia-Pacific markets. The second factor is economic complementarity. China needs energy, metals and agricultural products, while Kazakhstan seeks investment, infrastructure and technology. In recent years China has consistently been among Kazakhstan's two largest trading partners. The third factor is transit: Kazakhstan's ambition to become a land bridge between East Asia and Europe can only be realised in cooperation with China, which generates most of the cargo flows along this route.

At the same time, Kazakhstani policy-makers are aware of the risks of excessive dependence on any single partner. Scholars have noted that Astana uses its relations with Beijing to balance the traditional influence of Moscow, while using cooperation with Western partners to avoid one-sided reliance on Chinese capital [1; 5]. This logic explains why the Chinese vector, however important, is always embedded in a wider balancing scheme.

**2. Stages in the evolution of the partnership**

The relationship can be divided into four stages. The first stage (1992–2004) was devoted to building trust. Diplomatic relations were established in January 1992, and the most sensitive issue – the delimitation of the common border inherited from the Soviet period – was resolved through a

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series of agreements in the 1990s, with demarcation completed in 2002 [3]. In December 2002 the two states also signed the Treaty on Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation, which remains the legal foundation of the relationship and is referred to in every subsequent joint statement. The resolution of the border question removed the main source of potential conflict and created the political foundation for further cooperation. In 2004 the intergovernmental Cooperation Committee was set up, giving bilateral interaction a permanent institutional form.

The second stage (2005–2010) began with the proclamation of a strategic partnership in 2005. This period was marked by large energy projects, including the Atasu–Alashankou oil pipeline and the Kazakh section of the Central Asia–China gas pipeline, which turned energy into the backbone of the relationship. The third stage (2011–2018) opened with the upgrade to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2011. Two years later, in Astana, the Chinese leader announced the idea of the Silk Road Economic Belt [11], and Kazakhstan responded by linking its own infrastructure programme “Nurly Zhol” with the Chinese initiative [12]. Cooperation thus widened from energy to transport, logistics and industrial capacity.

The fourth stage started in September 2019, when the parties agreed on a permanent comprehensive strategic partnership [13]. In the following years the formula acquired practical substance. Beijing chose Kazakhstan as the destination of its leader’s first foreign trip after the pandemic in 2022, when the two sides also adopted an anniversary joint statement [14]. Kazakhstan then took part in the first in-person China–Central Asia summit in Xi’an in 2023 and hosted the second one in Astana in 2025, while citizens of both countries gained the right to visit each other without visas from November 2023. The sequence of upgrades shows a clear pattern: each new label reflected cooperation that had already been achieved, rather than an aspiration detached from practice.

The main stages of this evolution are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1 – Periodisation of Kazakh–Chinese cooperation: status and priorities**

| Stage | Period | Official status | Key events | Main focus |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| I | 1992–2004 | Good-neighbourly relations | Diplomatic relations (1992); border agreements and demarcation (completed 2002); Treaty on Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation (2002); Cooperation Committee (2004) | Trust-building, border security |
| II | 2005–2010 | Strategic partnership (2005) | Atasu–Alashankou oil pipeline; Kazakh section of the Central Asia–China gas pipeline | Energy |
| III | 2011–2018 | Comprehensive strategic partnership (2011) | Silk Road Economic Belt proposed in Astana (2013); joint declaration on a new stage of the partnership (2015); alignment with “Nurly Zhol” | Transport, logistics, industrial capacity |
| IV | 2019 – present | Permanent comprehensive strategic partnership (2019) | Joint statement on the 30th anniversary (2022); mutual visa-free regime (2023); China–Central Asia summits (2023, 2025) | Multi-dimensional cooperation |

*Source:* compiled by the author on the basis of [3; 12; 13; 14].

Table 1 shows that each stage widened the agenda rather than replacing it. Energy cooperation, which dominated the second stage, remained important in later years, but it was gradually complemented by transport, industrial and humanitarian components. The current stage therefore inherits the full set of earlier commitments and adds to them a long-term political horizon.

**3. The content of the partnership: four pillars**

The analysis of the joint statements of 2019 and 2022 makes it possible to group the content of the partnership into four interconnected pillars.

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*Political trust.* The first pillar is political. Both documents start from the principle that neither side interferes in the choices of the other, and they describe a routine of contacts that keeps this principle alive: meetings of leaders, dialogue between diplomatic services and joint positions at the UN and in the SCO. For a young state with a long border next to a great power, such language matters a great deal, because it turns respect for Kazakhstan's statehood into a written obligation of its largest neighbour. The anniversary statement of 2022 goes further and names mutual trust in politics as the base on which the whole partnership stands, linking it to support on the most sensitive questions of statehood [14].

*Economic and connectivity cooperation.* The second pillar includes trade, investment, industrial capacity cooperation, energy and, increasingly, transport and logistics. The alignment of "Nurly Zhol" with the Belt and Road Initiative serves as the organising idea of this pillar [12]. Its practical symbols are the Khorgos dry port and the international centre of cross-border cooperation on the common border, the growing number of container trains between China and Europe passing through Kazakhstan, and joint projects in processing industries. Recent agreements add renewable power, digital services and food production to this list. If these projects materialise, the economic side of the relationship will depend less on oil, gas and metals than it does today.

*Security cooperation.* The third pillar concerns threats that cross borders rather than threats from states: violent radical groups, smuggling, drug trafficking and illegal migration. The two countries work on these problems through their own border and law-enforcement agencies and through the regional structures of the SCO. An important feature is that security cooperation does not take the form of a military alliance: the parties coordinate on non-traditional threats while retaining full freedom in their defence policies.

*People-to-people ties.* The fourth pillar includes education, culture, tourism, media and youth exchanges. Thousands of Kazakhstani students study in China, Chinese language centres operate in Kazakhstan, and vocational training projects such as Luban Workshops have appeared in recent years. The visa-free regime introduced in 2023 has made short trips between the two countries much easier. This pillar is particularly important because public perception remains a sensitive aspect of the relationship: researchers have repeatedly pointed to persistent wariness towards China in parts of Kazakhstani society [4; 6].

**4. Distinctive features of the "permanent" partnership**

A comparison of the current stage with previous ones reveals three distinctive features.

The first feature is the *long-term time horizon*. The word "permanent" signals that the relationship is not tied to the term of particular leaders or to short-term economic conditions. In China's partnership diplomacy, labels are used to rank relations and to communicate the intended depth of commitment [8; 15]. By choosing a rare and emphatic formula, both sides signalled that they regard stability of the relationship as a value in itself.

The second feature is a *multi-level institutional architecture*. Cooperation now operates at four levels: summits of the heads of state; the intergovernmental Cooperation Committee and its subcommittees; regional and sub-national contacts, including twinning between provinces and cities; and the multilateral level represented by the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the China–Central Asia format. This architecture makes the partnership less dependent on individual decisions and gives it institutional inertia.

The third feature is *non-exclusivity*. The partnership does not oblige Kazakhstan to limit its relations with other states. Kazakhstan's comprehensive ties with Russia, its enhanced partnership with the European Union and its strategic dialogue with the United States continue to develop in parallel. In this sense, the permanent comprehensive strategic partnership is fully compatible with multi-vectorism and even strengthens it, since a stable relationship with China expands Kazakhstan's room for manoeuvre with respect to other powers.

**5. Kazakhstan's interests and instruments within the partnership**

The content of the partnership becomes clearer if it is viewed through the interests that Kazakhstan pursues in it. Four groups of interests can be distinguished. The first group is about safety. Calm relations with Beijing mean that Kazakhstan does not have to spend scarce resources

on guarding its eastern frontier and can rely on its neighbour when instability arises nearby. The second is economic modernisation: Chinese capital, technologies and construction capacity are used to build infrastructure and new industries that the national budget could not finance alone. The third is transit: cooperation with China allows Kazakhstan to turn its geographical position from a constraint into an advantage and to earn revenue from cargo flows between Asia and Europe. The fourth is international status: active partnership with a great power, combined with good relations with other centres of power, strengthens Kazakhstan's image as a reliable and independent participant in international affairs [2].

To pursue these interests, Kazakhstan relies on a set of instruments. At the political level, these are regular summits and the personal dialogue of the heads of state, which allow sensitive issues to be resolved quickly. At the institutional level, the intergovernmental Cooperation Committee coordinates sectoral cooperation and monitors the implementation of agreements. At the programme level, the alignment of "Nurly Zhol" with the Belt and Road Initiative provides a common framework for joint projects [12]. Finally, at the multilateral level, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the China–Central Asia format allow Kazakhstan to discuss regional issues together with its neighbours rather than one-on-one with a much larger partner.

An important point is that Kazakhstan does not treat these instruments as exclusive to China. Similar mechanisms – intergovernmental commissions, strategic dialogues and multilateral platforms – operate in its relations with Russia, the European Union, the United States, Türkiye and the Gulf states. This parallel use of the same toolkit is the practical expression of multi-vectorism: Kazakhstan deepens cooperation with China in the same way and with the same instruments that it uses with other partners, which prevents any single relationship from becoming dominant [1; 2].

**6. Theoretical interpretation and limitations of the partnership**

The results allow the permanent comprehensive strategic partnership to be interpreted from two theoretical perspectives. From the standpoint of the strategic partnership literature, it corresponds to the model of a goal-driven, informal arrangement that combines broad cooperation with the absence of mutual defence obligations [9]. From the standpoint of hedging theory, it can be seen as a tool that allows Kazakhstan to obtain economic benefits and political guarantees from a rising neighbour while preserving its autonomy and keeping other options open [10]. Our analysis suggests that the second interpretation better captures Kazakhstan's motives: Astana deepens ties with Beijing not in order to align with it, but in order to increase its own resilience.

At the same time, the partnership is not free of limitations. The first is asymmetry: the gap between the two economies means that Kazakhstan is more exposed to changes in Chinese demand and investment policy than the other way round. The second is the structure of trade, in which raw materials still dominate Kazakhstan's exports. The third is the social dimension: concerns about land, labour migration and debt periodically surface in public discourse and can affect the political climate [6]. Finally, the external environment – sanctions pressure on Russia, competition among great powers and instability in Afghanistan – creates additional uncertainty for transit and security cooperation.

It is also useful to compare the Kazakhstani and Chinese readings of the partnership. For Beijing, partnership labels form a graded system that reflects the importance of a country in Chinese foreign policy and the breadth of cooperation with it [8; 15]. From this perspective, the word "permanent" places Kazakhstan among China's most valued neighbours. For Astana, the same label has a different meaning: it is a guarantee of predictability that reduces the risks associated with dependence on a much larger neighbour. The partnership thus satisfies both sides precisely because each can interpret it in line with its own priorities.

These limitations explain why Kazakhstani officials pay particular attention to the diversification of cooperation, the localisation of Chinese investment, the creation of jobs for local citizens and the expansion of humanitarian exchanges. In our view, the future effectiveness of the partnership will depend less on new declarations than on the ability of both sides to address these sensitive issues and to turn the long-term political commitment into balanced economic and social outcomes.

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On the basis of the analysis, several practical recommendations can be formulated for Kazakhstan. First, it is advisable to give priority to Chinese investment in processing industries, agriculture and green energy, so as to change the raw-material structure of exports. Second, greater transparency of large joint projects, including information on employment of local citizens and environmental standards, would help to reduce public concerns. Third, the development of Chinese studies in Kazakhstani universities and expert dialogue between think tanks of the two countries would strengthen mutual understanding at the level of society, not only of governments. Fourth, Kazakhstan should continue to use multilateral formats – the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the China–Central Asia mechanism – to soften the asymmetry of bilateral relations and to coordinate its interests with neighbouring states.

**Conclusion**

The study shows that China occupies a key but non-exclusive place in Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy. The permanent comprehensive strategic partnership adopted in 2019 is the result of a gradual evolution in which each upgrade of the relationship consolidated results already achieved. Its content can be summarised in four pillars – political trust, economic and connectivity cooperation, security cooperation and people-to-people ties – while its distinctive features are a long-term time horizon, a multi-level institutional architecture and non-exclusivity.

For Kazakhstan, the partnership functions as an instrument of pragmatic hedging: it provides political guarantees, access to investment and transit opportunities without restricting relations with other partners. The main challenges remain economic asymmetry, the raw-material structure of trade and public perceptions. To make the partnership more balanced, Kazakhstan should prioritise investment in processing industries and green energy, increase the transparency of joint projects, develop Chinese studies and expert dialogue, and continue to rely on multilateral formats. Two directions look promising for future work: a comparison of how Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and other neighbours use their own partnership labels with Beijing, and a measurement, based on statistics, of what the joint "Nurly Zhol" – Belt and Road projects have actually delivered.

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