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### KAZAKHSTAN IN CHINA'S EURASIAN STRATEGY: ENERGY, CONNECTIVITY, AND THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

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#### Abstract

This article traces the development of China–Kazakhstan relations from Kazakhstan's independence in 1991 to the present day, focusing on the political, economic, security, and geopolitical dimensions of their bilateral partnership. Using a historical and qualitative approach, the study follows how the relationship evolved from the initial establishment of diplomatic ties into what is now a comprehensive strategic partnership, marked by deepening cooperation in energy, transportation, trade, and regional security. Special attention is paid to Kazakhstan's strategic role within China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the buildout of cross-border infrastructure and energy corridors, and the increasing weight of bilateral trade and investment in the relationship. The article also considers how multilateral mechanisms — particularly the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) — have contributed to building mutual trust and reinforcing regional stability.

**Keywords:** China; Kazakhstan; Central Asia; Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); Strategic Partnership; Energy Cooperation; Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO); Eurasian Connectivity; Foreign Policy; Xinjiang; Regional Security; Bilateral Trade.



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### Introduction

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1991, Kazakhstan has occupied a distinctive place in Beijing's Central Asian strategy, evolving from a newly independent post-Soviet neighbor into one of China's principal partners in energy security and Eurasian connectivity. Sharing a border of over 1,700 kilometers and possessing vast reserves of oil, natural gas, and uranium, Kazakhstan has become an indispensable node in China's outward economic and geopolitical projection, most visibly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was itself announced by President Xi Jinping in Astana in 2013. At the same time, the relationship is not without friction: concerns over Chinese treatment of the ethnic Kazakh minority in Xinjiang, anxieties about land sales and labor migration, and debates over debt dependency periodically test the otherwise cooperative tenor of bilateral ties. This article examines how these cooperative and contentious dynamics have coexisted and evolved since 1991, situating Kazakhstan's experience within the broader pattern of China's engagement with Central Asia.

### Literature Review

The existing scholarship on China–Kazakhstan relations can be broadly grouped into three strands. The first, exemplified by Kerimoglu, 2019 and Ekrem, 2011, offers a historical-descriptive account of the diplomatic, economic, and energy dimensions of the relationship, tracing its development from the early 1990s through the launch of the BRI. These works are particularly valuable for their detailed chronology of agreements, high-level visits, and infrastructure milestones, though they tend to treat the relationship primarily as a success story of mutually beneficial cooperation.

A second strand focuses more narrowly on the economic and energy dimension, quantifying trade volumes, pipeline capacity, and investment flows. Hanayi, 2020



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provides a detailed political-economic analysis of the relationship, while Kazakhstani and Russian-language sources such as E, 2022 document the institutional evolution of bilateral trade between 1992 and 2019. This literature establishes the material foundations of the partnership but generally offers less analysis of its political and social costs.

A third and more critical strand examines the risks and tensions embedded in the relationship. Borodyna & Nijhar, 2022 highlight the political risk that growing Chinese economic weight poses for Kazakhstan's domestic stability, while Bessler, 2020 and Putz, 2020 document the Xinjiang-related human rights concerns and the domestic Kazakh political backlash they have generated. Taken together, this body of literature demonstrates that the China–Kazakhstan relationship cannot be understood through the lens of economic cooperation alone; it must also account for the ethnic, security, and identity-related frictions that periodically surface in Kazakh public opinion and policymaking. However, comparatively few English-language studies integrate the economic, energy, and minority-rights dimensions into a single, chronologically continuous account — a gap this article seeks to address.

### Statement of the Problem

Much of the existing literature on China–Kazakhstan relations tends to compartmentalize its subject matter, treating energy cooperation, infrastructure development, and the Xinjiang question as largely separate lines of inquiry. This fragmentation makes it difficult to assess how economic interdependence and political sensitivities interact over time, and whether growing economic dependence on China constrains Kazakhstan's foreign policy autonomy or, conversely, whether Kazakhstan's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy has been effective in managing the tensions arising from that dependence. The core problem this



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research addresses, therefore, is the need for an integrated account of how cooperation and friction have jointly shaped the trajectory of China–Kazakhstan relations since 1991.

### **Subject of the Research**

The subject of this research is the bilateral relationship between the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Kazakhstan from the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1991 to the present, with particular attention to four interrelated dimensions: (1) the political-diplomatic architecture underpinning the relationship, including its elevation to a comprehensive strategic partnership; (2) energy and infrastructure cooperation, especially oil and gas pipelines and the Belt and Road Initiative; (3) the growth of bilateral trade and investment; and (4) the social and political tensions generated by the situation of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang, land-lease controversies, and labor migration.

### **Research Objectives**

This study pursues the following objectives: first, to reconstruct the chronological development of China–Kazakhstan diplomatic and institutional relations from 1991 to the present; second, to assess the scale and significance of energy and infrastructure cooperation, including the role of Kazakhstan within the Belt and Road Initiative; third, to analyze the evolution of bilateral trade and investment flows and their impact on Kazakhstan’s economy; and fourth, to examine how the Xinjiang question and related social tensions have affected, or failed to affect, the broader trajectory of bilateral cooperation.



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### **Methodology**

This article employs a qualitative, historical-descriptive research design. Data were drawn from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed academic articles, government and think-tank reports, dissertations, and reputable news outlets in English, Russian, and Turkish. The analysis proceeds chronologically, tracing the relationship from the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1991 through successive stages of institutionalization — including the 2002 Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, the 2005 and 2011 strategic-partnership declarations, and the 2013 launch of the Belt and Road Initiative — before turning thematically to energy cooperation, trade statistics, and the Xinjiang-related tensions. This combination of chronological and thematic analysis allows the study to situate specific agreements and events within the broader arc of the relationship while still isolating the distinct economic, security, and social dynamics at play.

The PRC, which is one of the world's most populous states, started its current development path in the 70s of the 20th century when Deng Xiaoping took power in Beijing. From that moment on, China began to be recognized in the world as a communist state that adopted the necessary rules of capitalism. This move by China drew USSR's criticism many times because China was adopting the system against the ideas of Marx and Lenin. The debate between these two great powers continued until the 1990s, that is, until the collapse of the USSR. With the emergence of independent states in 1991, the non-war conflict between the USSR and China came to an end. With the fall of the Soviets, China has seen a strategic plan to establish good cooperation with young independent states in all aspects. Thus, diplomatic relations between the Central Asian states and China began in 1991. One of the states that China attaches importance to establishing relations with was Kazakhstan (Kerimoglu, 2019). At that time, the population of Kazakhstan was around 15 million. Soil width is ninth in the world. Limited to five



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states (China, Russia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan), Kazakhstan's soil is very rich. Kazakhstan has abundant oil in the Caspian Sea field, abundant uranium in its centre, natural gas resources in the South and Southwest region, and abundant coloured metals and coal has attracted world states to invest even from the very first moment (Kazakhstan - oil & Gas Equipment and services 2022). The territory of Kazakhstan is the region that prevents Russia from carrying out its imperial movements towards Central Asia. Because it is between Central Asia and Russia. Therefore, the Russian Empire, which expanded to the South, was able to reach other Central Asian states about 130 years later than Kazakhstan. Despite its large territory, Kazakhstan is a less populated state. This is due to the genocides in Kazakh history. Only in 1917, 1921, and 1930-33 did the Kazakh nation loses about 4.5 million people to starvation (Isabelle, 2013). Hundreds of thousands of Kazakhs were shot and executed because of the totalitarian regime. In order not to die, around a million Kazakhs had to go abroad. Some of them are said to be around 1.5 million in China today. There is a project to return the Kazakhs of the world to their fatherland, which was realized with the interest of the President of Kazakhstan himself. "Oralmans" came to Kazakhstan with this project that has been taking place since 1997. The number of (returned to their homeland) has exceeded one million. There are very few states in the world that invite their nationality from other countries through programs. They are Germany, Russia, Israel and Kazakhstan. The Kazakhstani leader had mentioned this issue in his meeting with the Chinese President. The President of Kazakhstan - N. Nazarbayev mentioned the issue of returning Kazakhs from China to Kazakhstan, reminding Tzyan Zemin that China promised that it would never do anything bad to Kazakhstan (YESSİRKEPOV, 2010). Nazarbayev said that this was Kazakhstan's strategic project and requested that the wishes of Kazakhs who "only" want to return to their homeland in China be allowed to come. Because it was a very delicate subject.



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Official Beijing does not divide its citizens into Uighurs, Kazakhs and Russians. All of China's 1 billion 400 million citizens are called Chinese. This is one of the security measures. If it does not do so, other nationalities that want their independence by bringing the ethnic problem to the official agenda may pose a threat to the integrity of China. N. Nazarbayev asked permission to return only those who were willing; that was the reason. Tzyan Zemin had promised to solve this matter well. Since the first years, Kazakhstan has given great importance to its foreign policy with China (Borodyna & Nijhar, 2022). The history of diplomatic relations between the two sides began in July 1991 with the first official visit of Kazakhstan President N. Nazarbayev to China. At that time, the railway providing Kazakhstan- China relations were on Russian soil. Since that moment, the projects of constructing the railway line connecting the two states began to be discussed. Therefore, the Chinese side has built a 460-kilometre railway line from Ürümçü to the "Drucba" (Friendship) station (YESSİRKEPOV, 2010).

On September 1, 1991, the first train started its journey. In 1995, an agreement was signed to develop the freight transport business with the Dostuk-Alaşköy railway line. This agreement was realized, and bilateral trade-economic relations continued to develop. In this region, the railwaymen and the soldiers at the border were successful in combating the drug trade, smuggling and illegal activities on this railway line. Contributors to the conclusion of this agreement, PRC President Tzyan Tzemin and Prime Minister Li Peng, President of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbayev and the Minister of Foreign Affairs were politicians such as K. Tokayev, the most experienced Chinese expert in Kazakhstan. More than one million Kazakh people live in China (Uatkhanov, 2016). Most of them live in the Altai mountain region of East Turkestan. The reasons for it differ. Many were imprisoned, and many were shot. Therefore, some of these Kazakh intellectuals migrated to the Altai region. Another reason stemmed from the old regime



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mentioned above. Communist ideology suggested that everyone's financial situation should be equal. In the first years of the 20th century, communists orchestrated purges against wealthy Kazakh tribesmen, and their properties were confiscated (Volkava, 2012). Some Kazakhs who were rich at that time also had to migrate to the Altai region. The majority of Kazakhs in East Turkestan live in their homeland. Because those lands remained in the territory of China due to the political border division consequences. Because Kazakhstan- China state border has found its own solution. As a result of determining the border after independence, these issues were solved for the benefit of China. Currently, most of the indigenous Kazakhs live in the Ile-Kazakh autonomous region (Ile, Altay, and Tarbagatay regions) in East Turkestan and the Aksay province of the Gansu region. These Kazakhs have great importance in Kazakhstan-China political-economic relations. After the official Embassy of the PRC was opened in Almaty in February, the Embassy of Kazakhstan in Beijing opened in December 1992 (Kerimoglu, 2019). These official political relations have had an economic impact on both sides. Because towards the end of 1992, there were around 30 companies established by Chinese businessmen (most of them were traders who had nothing to do with industry). These companies increased ten times towards 2004. At the same time, the number of illegal products and illegally taken raw materials has increased. The exchange method was used in trade and economic relations with China. In the last 20 years, the number of illegal workers has increased by crossing the two sides. (Е, ОТНОШЕНИЯ КИТАЙСКОЙ НАРОДНОЙ РЕСПУБЛИКИ И РЕСПУБЛИКИ КАЗАХСТАН В 1992-2019 ГОДЫ (RELATIONS OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AND REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN IN 1992-2019) 2022) Most of them were workers who came to Kazakhstan from China. The world was afraid of the Chinese population back then, which was growing quite rapidly. This was an indication of the huge Chinese population



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spreading all over the world. Every country that complies with international terms and agreements prohibits "smuggling". This gives back influence for populous nations like China to migrate to other countries and live. However, most of the world's states do not allow foreigners to settle in their places. In October 1993, Kazakhstan President N. Nazarbayev's visit to China was organized. During this meeting, the two sides signed the declaration on the Expansion of Friendly Relations. This Statement is of great importance. During the agreement, official Beijing frequently stated that China had not signed with the Soviet states for about 30 years. This is real. The Chinese signed this declaration with the USSR in 1950. According to this Declaration, peace between the two parties will last for a long time, and relations will be developed appropriately for both sides. Both sides agreed to contribute to the cooperation in the political field and ensure peace in Asia and the World. Energy usage, neighbourhood compatibility in the field of commercial-economic relationships, metallurgy, natural gas and oil transportation, and weaving business would be of great importance. In the military field, in the job of providing security in the border areas or fighting together against smuggling, etc., agreed on the issues. China will never put military pressure on Kazakhstan and will not use its armed forces against Kazakhstan. He promised not to use it on purpose. In 1994, a complex issue arose in East Turkestan (Kerimoglu, 2019).

The reason for this is the recognition of the activity organized by the "East Turkestan Rescue Front" in Almaty against the official Beijing Chinese policy. As a result, Kazakhstan-Chinese officials met and expressed their hope that the problem would be resolved well. On 25-28 April 1994, during the official visit of Chinese Prime Minister Li to the country with the invitation of the President of Kazakhstan Nazarbayev, the "Kazakhstan-China Border Agreement", the "Agreement on the Government of China to Provide Credit to Kazakhstan" and the "Kazakhstan- China Border Agreement" between the two countries. Agreements



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such as "Negotiations Protocol for Improving Rail Freight Transport" were signed. On September 11-13, 1995, Chinese President Jiang made the first Presidential visit of China to Kazakhstan upon the invitation of Kazakh President Nazarbayev (Ekrem, 2011). The Shanghai Five was established with the signing of the "Agreement on Deepening Military Security in the Border Regions" between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on April 26, 1996, in Shanghai. With the positive effect of the establishment of the Shanghai Five, some Soviet-era border problems were resolved between Kazakhstan and China in 1998. While the "Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighborhood between Kazakhstan and China" was signed on December 23, 2002, the "Joint Declaration on Establishment and Development of Strategic Partnership Between Kazakhstan and China" was signed during the visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao to Kazakhstan on July 03-04, 2005 (Е, ОТНОШЕНИЯ КИТАЙСКОЙ НАРОДНОЙ РЕСПУБЛИКИ И РЕСПУБЛИКИ КАЗАХСТАН В 1992-2019 ГОДЫ (RELATIONS OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AND REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN IN 1992-2019) 2022). With the signing of the agreement, the leaders of the two countries decided to raise the political, economic and commercial relations shaped on the basis of mutual trust between Kazakhstan and China to the level of strategic partnership. Finally, on June 13, 2011, during the visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao to Kazakhstan, the "Joint Declaration on the Development of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Between Kazakhstan and China" was signed. The emergence of new regional and global geopolitical and geoeconomic strategies of China, with the beginning of a new administration period in China under the presidency of Xi Jinping in 2013, brought Kazakhstan-China relations to a new stage. With the signing of the "Joint Declaration on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Between Kazakhstan and China" within the scope of the first official visit of Chinese President Xi to



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Kazakhstan on September 7, 2013, Kazakhstan-China relations gained significant momentum. During the visit of Chinese President Xi, trade agreements of approximately 30 billion dollars were signed between Kazakhstan and China, especially an agreement for the Kashagan oil field. In addition, the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, which is highly evaluated by the Beijing administration today, was announced for the first time during the aforementioned visit of Chinese President Xi (Kerimoglu, 2019). In terms of Kazakhstan's position as a bridge between China and Eurasia, the Chinese President's announcement of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative during his visit to Kazakhstan may indicate that the Beijing administration attaches great importance to Kazakhstan on this initiative. In the last few years, the political relations between Kazakhstan and China have been strengthened by mutual high-level visits. China, which is trying to expand its relations with Central Asian countries and the Eurasian Economic Union, especially within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), attaches more importance to its bilateral relations with Kazakhstan. On September 1-5, 2016, the President of Kazakhstan Nazarbayev attended the 2016 G20 Hangzhou Summit at the invitation of President Xi of China. This invitation by the Beijing administration can be considered an indication of the importance China attaches to its bilateral relations with Kazakhstan. Lastly, on April 18, 2017, the First Deputy Prime Minister of China, Zhang Gaoli, visited Kazakhstan. On April 21-24, 2017, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held meetings with Kazakhstan President Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan Prime Minister Bakitjan Sagintayev and Foreign Minister Kairat Abdrakhmanov within the scope of the SCO Astana Summit. The parties held talks to further develop the special and comprehensive strategic partnership relations of the two countries within the framework of the SCO and the One Belt One Road initiative. As a matter of fact, the leaders of the two countries held a meeting within the scope of the One Belt One Road



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International Cooperation Forum held in Beijing on 14-15 May, 2017. In addition, Chinese President Xi paid an official visit to Kazakhstan on 7-9 June 2017 and attended the Astana EXPO- 2017 fair. Since 1992, the increasing political relations between Kazakhstan and China have contributed greatly to the development of an important cooperation environment and economic relations between the two countries, especially in the energy field. In general, cooperation in the field of energy gains importance in the economic relations between Kazakhstan and China (Kerimoglu, 2019). The factors causing this are, on the one hand, Kazakhstan's economic growth based on oil and natural gas exports after its independence and, on the other hand, the rapid increase in energy consumption with the increasing economic growth of China after the 1990s. It can be said that the energy cooperation between Kazakhstan and China passed an important stage in 2006. Because the Kazakhstan-China Oil Pipeline project, which started with the agreement between the Astana and Beijing governments in 1997, was completed in December 2005 and the first oil reached China in July 2006 through the said pipeline (Е, ОТНОШЕНИЯ КИТАЙСКОЙ НАРОДНОЙ РЕСПУБЛИКИ И РЕСПУБЛИКИ КАЗАХСТАН В 1992-2019 ГОДЫ (RELATIONS OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AND REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN IN 1992-2019) 2022). The total amount of oil transported through the Kazakhstan-China Oil Pipeline, which started operating in 2006, reached 100 million tons as of March 29, 2017. The first phase of the Kazakhstan-China Natural Gas Pipeline project, also known as the Turkmenistan-China Natural Gas Pipeline, was completed in December 2009. The construction of the Beyneu-Bozoy-Chimkent Pipeline, the second part of the Kazakhstan-China Natural Gas Pipeline, has been completed and has been operating since April 2017. This stage is aimed to transport 60 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually over the Kazakhstan-China Natural Gas Pipeline. According to experts, by 2020, it is expected that China, the world's



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second-largest energy consumer, will surpass the USA and rank first in oil and gas imports, and oil consumption will reach 430-610 million tons. From this point of view, it can be said that the Chinese government will attach more importance to cooperation with Kazakhstan in the field of energy in the coming years (Ekrem, 2011). Horgos Free Economic Zone, also known as the Kazakhstan-China International Cross-Border Cooperation Center, which started construction in 2007, makes an important contribution to further increase the economic and commercial relations between Kazakhstan and China, with its official start on April 18, 2012. For example, according to Chinese data, the number of people who came to Horgos Cross-Border Cooperation Center for commercial purposes on April 18, 2012, was only 240 thousand, while this figure was 100.292 million until August 2016. From April 18 2012, to August 2016, the total trade volume realized at the Horgos Cross-Border Cooperation Center was approximately 884.07 million dollars. In the first 11 months of 2016, the transit shipment volume of the Horgos crossing was 23.5818 million tons, an increase of 18.87% compared to the first 11 months of 2015 (Kerimoglu, 2019). This figure corresponds to 59.99% of the total transit shipment amount of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. In addition to the Horgos crossing, which includes the Horgos Cross-Border Cooperation Center, Alatav, Bakty and Cemeney crossings operate between Kazakhstan and China. Within the framework of bilateral cooperation between Kazakhstan and China, transportation routes reaching Eurasia and Europe via Kazakhstan have been strengthened in recent years. While the Chinese part of the West China-Western Europe highway passing through Kazakhstan has been fully put into use, the majority of the 2,639 kilometres over Kazakhstan has been completed. With the realization of the Cetigen- Horgos and Cezkazgan-Beineu railway projects by the Kazakhstan Railway (KTZ) company in 2014, the transportation routes from China to the Horgos pass to the Aktau port in the West of Kazakhstan were



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connected. It is estimated that the transit shipment amount of rail cargo transportation via Horgos will reach 18 million tons in 2020 and 31.5 million tons in 2035. The transit shipment amount of rail cargo transportation via Horgos was recorded as 2.5848 million tons. As a matter of fact, the importance of the Kazakhstan-China railway passing through the Alatau pass is increasing day by day. For example, the shipment amount of container transportation passing through Alatau Pass in 2016 was 1.381 million tons, an increase of 25.8% compared to 2015 (Е, ОТНОШЕНИЯ КИТАЙСКОЙ НАРОДНОЙ РЕСПУБЛИКИ И РЕСПУБЛИКИ КАЗАХСТАН В 1992-2019 ГОДЫ (RELATIONS OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AND REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN IN 1992-2019) 2022). In addition, the China-Kazakhstan-Europe train service on Alatau is more than 1200. According to Kazakhstan data, the amount of freight transported in railway transportation between Kazakhstan and China in 2016 reached 8.3 million tons. According to KTZ, this amount is expected to increase by 32.4% in 2017, Kazakhstan's exports to China are expected to increase by 18.9% to 5.59 million tons, and imports from China are expected to increase by 1.5 times as 5.4 million tons. Finally, on March 22, 2017, a contract was signed to start the 265-kilometre-long Şaveşek-Ayagöz railway line between Kazakhstan and China in Şaveşek, China. Moreover, it is foreseen that this railway line will be included in the railway line to be connected to Siberia and Transsiberia via Kazakhstan. In 1992, the bilateral trade volume between Kazakhstan and China was only 369.1 million dollars, of which Kazakhstan's exports to China were 227.93 million dollars, and its imports from China were 141.17 million dollars. In 2002, the bilateral trade volume between Kazakhstan and China increased to 1.95 billion dollars and increased by 81.07% (Ekrem, 2011). Within this, Kazakhstan's exports to China increased by 83.12% to 1.35 billion dollars, and its imports from China increased by 76.5% to 600 million dollars. Although the bilateral trade volume



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between Kazakhstan and China decreased by 20.2% compared to the previous year, 14.004 billion dollars in 2009, it surpassed the bilateral trade volume between Kazakhstan and Russia for the first time. In 2012, the bilateral trade volume between Kazakhstan and China reached 23.98 billion dollars, an increase of 14.9% compared to 2011. Within this, Kazakhstan's export to China increased by 3.9% to 16.48 billion dollars, its share in Kazakhstan's total exports was 19.3%, and its import from China was 750 million dollars with an increase of 49.7%, while its share in Kazakhstan's total imports was 28% (Hanayi, 2020). However, with these figures, China has become Kazakhstan's largest trading partner. The effects of the Eurasian Economic Union on the economy of Kazakhstan in recent years and the financial crisis in Russia, as well as the shrinkage of the Kazakhstan economy as a result of the decrease in oil prices, adversely affected the foreign trade between Kazakhstan and China. For example, while the bilateral trade volume between Kazakhstan and China in 2015 decreased by 38.8% compared to 2014 to 10.57 billion dollars, Kazakhstan's exports to China decreased by 44.1% to 5.48 billion dollars, and its imports from China by 5.08 billion dollars decreased by 31.7%. In 2016, the bilateral trade volume between Kazakhstan and China was 7.88 billion dollars, decreasing by 25.4% compared to 2015 (Hanayi, 2020). Within this, Kazakhstan's exports to China decreased by 23.1%. With these figures, China has become Kazakhstan's second-largest export and largest import market. In January 2017, the bilateral trade volume between Kazakhstan and China was 710 million dollars, 43.6% compared to January 2016, Kazakhstan's exports to China were 370 million dollars, 51.8%, and its imports from China were 3.3 million dollars. increased by 35.4% (Hanayi, 2020). The parties aim to increase the bilateral trade volume to 40 billion dollars in 2020. It is possible to list the developing trade relations between Kazakhstan and China by years as follows; As of 2004, a contract for uranium extraction was signed between Kazatomprom and China National



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Nuclear Corporation. In 2005, the "Strategic Cooperation Agreement" was signed between the two states regarding the strengthening of atomic energy ties. Regarding electricity generation, another cooperation item between the two countries, the Strategic Cooperation Agreement dated 2005, was made between the Kazakh National Electricity Company KEGOC and the Chinese GRID Corporation, creating a Sino-Kazakh electricity partnership (Ekrem, 2011). An agreement signed between Kazatomprom and China Guangdong Nuclear Power Holding in 2006 also provides nuclear fuel supply to Kazakhstan's Chinese power plants. More recent data reveal the magnitude of trade progress between China and Kazakhstan to date. In 2019, China Export-Import Bank lent Kazakhstan \$283 billion worth of loans (Hanayi, 2020). Again, as of 2019, the industrial capacity transfer from China to Kazakhstan covers 51 projects and has a value of 26 billion dollars. According to June 2017 data, "The total investment of China in Kazakhstan since its independence is 42.8. According to the data of the same year, the credits given to the country exceeds 50 billion dollars." The 5-fold increase in the credits Kazakhstan received from China in a year compared to 2017 and 2019 is an important indicator that reveals the enormous growth rate of trade relations. In the same parallel, it is not surprising that Kazakhstan is the country that receives the most direct investment from China among the Commonwealth of Independent States members. As a matter of fact, the rapidly advancing bilateral relations have brought some doubts and discussions. Nazarbayev's rival, opposition politician Murat Auezov, is a clear example of the debate among Kazakh politicians, who argues that China's purchase of oil, gas and fields, which will leave relatively little profit, stems from strategic interests rather than energy gains. The Belt and Road Project (BRI) has been one of the most important developments affecting Kazakhstan's relations with China since 2013. The states that are planned to pass through the project, which provides a kind of commercial transit route, are



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supported by China in terms of economy and infrastructure. Therefore, it is one of the issues affecting the Kazakhstan-China relationship. Kazakhstan is one of the most important elements of the BRI project, as it is located on the route that directly connects the West to China. Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the BRI at Nursultan Nazarbayev University in 2013, confirming Kazakhstan's position as a resource exporter and transit provider. Another reason that increases the importance of Kazakhstan in BRI is that it is more reliable in the trade route to the West than the Pakistan corridor. At this point, the China-Kazakhstan railway network in Alashankou stands out as an important BRI corridor. Another railway crossing is Khorgos. As part of the Belt and Road project, China is investing in Kazakhstan in infrastructure activities such as railways and highways. As a matter of fact, as of 2018, China appears to be Kazakhstan's largest source of commercial credit. Nevertheless, this project should not be seen as an economic exit that Kazakhstan needs relatively more. It is clear that China, the creator of the project, also had the opportunity to benefit greatly from the project. China seeks to diversify its trade routes, as 80% of its oil exports come from the Strait of Malacca in Southeast Asia. For this reason, BRI has the feature of influencing China's long-term political economy as well as developing the Central Asian states. From this perspective, it is easier to understand why agreements are generally based on the extraction of natural resources in exchange for investments and infrastructure projects in the oil and gas sector. An issue that casts a shadow over the developing relations between China and Kazakhstan has been China's policies in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. China has approximately 1.5 million citizens of Kazakh origin, most of whom live in the Xinjiang region. The fact that the Chinese government has created an environment without freedom in the region, especially in recent years, has caused the Kazakh public to pay close attention to the developments in the Xinjiang region. In fact, not only Kazakhs but also many



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people and communities who are sensitive to human rights in the world's public opinion react to the gravity of the situation. The turning point in the Chinese government's implementation of serious measures for the minority in the Xinjiang region was the Urumqi rebellion. China, which has increased its measures after this period, has implemented many restrictions and prevented the people of the region from living with their own identity. In the last few years, the Chinese government built facilities surrounded by watchtowers, high walls and barbed wire. People are identified and placed in these facilities, which the Chinese government sees as places where extremists are reintegrated into a society based on their potential to commit crimes. China legitimizes existing facilities as "transformation through education". However, the facilities, where the reality is very different, resemble prisons or concentration camps due to their physical structure and necessity. The Chinese authorities legitimize their restrictive influence in the region as the fight against terrorism, extremism and separatism. According to 2008 data, China-Kazakhstan trade constitutes 2/3 of all Central Asian trade. Considering that the trade between Xinjiang and Kazakhstan constitutes more than 2/3 of the trade between China and Kazakhstan, the importance of the Xinjiang region is important. Kazakhstan's unwillingness to disrupt its good relations with China in the context of the "Multi-vector Foreign Policy" strategy caused a reaction to the developments in the region. As an example, it is possible to show the date of October 2017. After Senator Nurlan Kylyshbayev made an official request to the Kazakh government to confirm whether the news about the persecution of Kazakhs in China is true or not, the issue came to the fore in the country's politics. Thereupon, the Foreign Ministry of Kazakhstan held meetings with Chinese diplomats, and Zhang Hanhui, the Chinese ambassador to Kazakhstan, said that these were a kind of "implementation of increased security measures". Diplomatic initiatives of the Kazakh Foreign Affairs towards Kazakhs in Xinjiang continued in 2018 in the



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context of bilateral relations. However, it is not possible to say that there has been a great change in the current state of the Xinjiang region regarding how active and successful these initiatives and the diplomacy carried out were. Another example is Serikzhan Bilash, leader of the Atazhurt Eriktileri (Homeland Volunteers) movement, which campaigned for the release of Kazakhs held in facilities in Xinjiang, and was arrested and prosecuted by the Kazakh authorities (Putz, 2020). After reaching an agreement between him and Chinese authorities the following year, he was released after paying a fine. The anti-Chinese sentiment in the public is also reflected in the China-Kazakhstan bilateral relations. The main reason for the protests that took place in Kazakhstan in 2016 was the permission to lease long-term land to foreigners. Although the government suppressed the protests later, this situation was reflected in the 2019 elections. A political group, People's Congress, put forward demands for solutions to the issues of granting land to foreigners, discrimination in Xinjiang and borrowing from China. In addition, anti-government protests still continue in various places. Social media shares also play a major role in the fact that the fate of the Kazakhs in the camps, which China calls "re-education centres", has managed to stay on the agenda. As explained above, although the issue of Kazakh ethnic minorities in Xinjiang continues to be on the agenda of Kazakhstan through the influence of public opinion and opposition, it is not possible to say that this has adversely affected the good bilateral relations with China in Kazakhstan's foreign policy. Therefore, Kazakh ethnic minorities living in China's Xinjiang region are relatively ignored in order for Kazakhstan to implement the Multi-Vector Foreign Policy without any problems. With the announcement of the New Silk Road Project in 2013, China made extensive land purchases in Central Asia. With the closeness brought about by commercial relations, the renting of some agricultural lands to China came to the fore in Kazakhstan at this time. However, this situation caused intense objections and



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disturbances in the country. Especially in March 2016, the Kazakh administration decided to lease the areas reserved as agricultural land for 25 years, not ten years, unlike the previous ones (Service, 2021). The allegations that this decision was actually taken for Chinese agricultural sector companies led to serious protests in the country. After these developments, President Nazarbayev, at the time, stopped the law from entering into force. In the same year, a Chinese propaganda video spread on social media accelerated the reaction of the Kazakh public. In the video, which includes China's land demand from Kazakhstan, it was claimed that Lake Balkhash should be within the borders of China. The video in question created a serious disturbance in the country. As a matter of fact, the New Silk Road Project is perceived by a significant part of the Kazakh people as a means of China's expansionist goal in Central Asia (Bessler, 2020). The claims that China, which is the most populous country in the world, will buy large lands in the region and establish colonies there is met with concern by the Kazakh society. At this point, the Kazakh administration is also very careful in certain issues in its relations with China. Although the commercial relations between the two countries continue to develop, Chinese citizens are not allowed to live in groups and become ghettos, as well as not sell land. In addition, while the concept of nation-nation has matured in Kazakhstan in recent years, it is observed that the extreme nationalist tendency has increased especially in Western Kazakhstan; this situation is also effective in bringing some reactions against minorities to the agenda from time to time. At this point, workers and employees from China draw the most reaction. In addition to the historical opposition to China in the country, economic reasons can also cause these reactions. Although the agreements signed between Nur-Sultan and Beijing generally prohibit the bringing of collective workers to the country, the fact that many Chinese companies come with hundreds of workers causes controversy in the Kazakh public. From time to time, videos of Chinese workers in Kazakhstan,



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secretly filmed on social media, are shared thousands of times, and Kazakh people openly express their discomfort with this situation. In summary, It is expected that the relations between Kazakhstan and China, which have developed continuously with the energy agreement signed in 1997 and the New Silk Road Project announced in 2013 (Kerimoglu, 2019), will continue to develop from now on. At this point, although Kazakhstan benefits from the large investments made by China in the country, being an important energy supplier for Beijing makes bilateral relations a win-win situation. However, Beijing's unacceptable torture and genocide policy in East Turkestan and the historical anti-Chinese sentiment in Kazakhstan also has the potential to evolve the future of bilateral relations in a different direction.

### **Conclusion**

The evolution of China–Kazakhstan relations since 1991 illustrates how economic complementarity and strategic proximity can sustain a deepening partnership even in the presence of persistent political sensitivities. Beijing’s need to diversify its energy imports and trade routes away from the Strait of Malacca converged with Astana’s need for capital, infrastructure, and export markets, producing a relationship that advanced through successive stages of institutionalization — from the 1991 establishment of diplomatic ties, through the 2005 and 2011 strategic-partnership declarations, to the 2013 launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in Astana itself. Energy pipelines, cross-border trade corridors such as Khorgos, and tens of billions of dollars in credit and investment have made China Kazakhstan’s largest trading partner and one of its principal sources of external finance.

At the same time, this study has shown that the relationship is not free of structural tension. The situation of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang, recurring controversies over agricultural land leases, and public unease over Chinese labor migration have



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repeatedly tested the Kazakh government's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy, forcing Astana to balance economic dependence on Beijing against domestic political legitimacy. Thus far, Kazakhstan has generally managed these tensions through calculated diplomatic restraint rather than open confrontation, prioritizing the material benefits of the relationship over vocal advocacy on human rights. Whether this balance remains sustainable will depend on the future trajectory of Chinese policy in Xinjiang, the pace of Kazakhstan's economic diversification, and the extent to which domestic public opinion continues to shape foreign policy in Nur-Sultan. Future research would benefit from primary-source interviews with policymakers on both sides and from a comparative analysis of how China's other Central Asian partners have managed the same trade-off between economic opportunity and political risk.

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