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Eurasianism and Role Theory: Conceptual Insights from Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy (1991-2019)

A. Bauyrzhankyzy*¹, A. Zholmanov²

Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, Kazakhstan

(E-mail: aikyz.bauyrzhankyzy@gmail.com, Azamat.zholmanov@apa.kz)

Abstract. This article uses role theory to examine how Eurasianism shaped Kazakhstan's national role conception during the formative decades of its independence (1991-2019). Drawing on presidential speeches, strategic documents and secondary analyses, it traces how President Nursultan Nazarbayev recast Eurasianism from a geographical label into a strategic role identity—the “Eurasian Bridge.” Building on Kalevi Holsti's concept of National Role Conceptions (NRCs), the article argues that Eurasianism functioned as a foreign-policy role that linked domestic imperatives of interethnic harmony with an external orientation of balance and cooperation.

The analysis shows how this Eurasian Bridge role underpinned Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy, informed its pattern of institutional alignments across Eurasian and Euro-Atlantic fora, and shaped its security framing as one of cooperative, region-wide threat management rather than bloc confrontation.

Empirically, the case illustrates how a mid-sized post-Soviet state converted structural “in-betweenness” into diplomatic agency by constructing a mediating role between Russia, China and the West.

Theoretically, the article contributes to Foreign Policy Analysis by demonstrating how an elite-driven civilizational idea can be translated into a durable national role conception and by highlighting the value of integrating role theory with small-state diplomacy in Eurasia.

Keywords: Eurasianism, Kazakhstan, national role conception, Eurasian Bridge, multi-vector foreign policy, Central Asia.

Introduction

When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, the newly independent Central Asian republics confronted profound political, social, and economic crises. Among them, Kazakhstan faced particularly acute challenges: an absence of prior statehood, dependence on Soviet infrastructure, and a heterogeneous population. Under such conditions, the country's leadership had to invent both the idea and the practice of sovereignty. President Nursultan Nazarbayev responded by embedding a distinctive vision of Kazakhstan's place in the world-Eurasianism-into his country's state-building narrative. He presented Kazakhstan as a "Eurasian Bridge" linking East and West, a mediator among civilizations, and a stabilizing actor in a volatile region. This study explores how Eurasianism evolved into a national role conception, shaping both Kazakhstan's domestic legitimacy and its foreign-policy behavior.

Scholars have examined various aspects of Kazakhstan's post-Soviet development, from institutional transformations to nation-building and identity formation. A number of works link Kazakhstan's foreign policy choices to questions of national identity, ideology, economic conditions and geopolitical orientation. As Cummings observes [11], Kazakhstan's national identity functions as a filter between external expectations and state responses. Geographic constraints-landlocked location between Russia and China, dependence on neighbors for trade routes-have strongly shaped the country's strategic calculus. These same factors underlie the emergence of Kazakhstan's "Eurasian Bridge" concept as a guiding idea in its foreign policy. Building on this scholarship, the present article adopts a Role Theory perspective to analyze how Kazakhstan formulated Eurasianism as its national role and operationalized that role in external behavior. The central argument is that Eurasianism, reframed as a national role conception, provided an ideational compass for Kazakhstan's multi-vector diplomacy, harmonizing internal diversity with external balancing. In role-theoretic terms, Nazarbayev cultivated a foreign-policy role for Kazakhstan as an intermediary and integrator in Eurasian affairs, thereby linking identity formation to foreign-policy conduct.

This article examines Kazakhstan's foreign policy under Nursultan Nazarbayev from 1991 to 2019. Nursultan Nazarbayev has been the dominant executive decision maker in Kazakhstan since the late Soviet period and effectively the only president of independent Kazakhstan until his resignation in March 2019. Formally, he became president of the Kazakh SSR in April 1990 and then of independent Kazakhstan after the 1 December 1991 election, remaining in office through a series of constitutional changes and elections that removed term limits and allowed him to serve multiple mandates (1991, 1999, 2005, 2011, 2015) [14; 11; 31]. Throughout 1991–2019, Nazarbayev concentrated political power in the presidency, shaped the constitution to expand executive authority, and personally dominated all key areas of domestic and foreign policy. Scholars consistently describe this period as one of "super presidential" or "hyper centralized" rule in which he shaped the political system of the Kazakh nation and was at the epicenter of all state affairs [11]. He formally stepped down in March 2019, retaining only the titles of First President and Leader of the Nation and key posts such as chair of the Security Council, it is the 1991–2019 interval that captures his tenure as sitting president with full constitutional powers, and thus the period in which he directly exercised day to day control over Kazakhstan's foreign policy making [31; 25].

The following sections review the literature, outline the methodology and conceptual framework, followed by case analysis and a discussion of broader findings. The conclusion summarizes the findings and suggests directions for further theoretical development.

1. Literature review

1.1 Historical background

Central Asia historically functioned as the crossroads of civilizations, religions, and trade. Its centrality situated it between great powers, Russia and China to the north and east, the Middle East and South Asia to the west and south. The traditional term Turkistan denoted Turkic-speaking regions, including parts of present-day Kazakhstan, but its territorial meaning was never fixed [1]. The term was used by Emperor Babur (1483-1530) and indicated the region which today forms a part of Kazakhstan [1]. The modern label Central Asia only took root after the emergence of the five independent states-Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan-in 1991.

That year, the Alma-Ata Declaration formally ended the existence of the USSR. The post-Soviet republics inherited weak institutions, economic dislocation, and inter-ethnic strains [30; 3]. They also faced external insecurity deriving from geography-exposure to Russia and China-and from nearby conflicts such as the Afghan civil war and the Gulf War [1]. Moscow's earlier cadre policy had deliberately weakened local clan structures [1]. The resulting mixture of Soviet bureaucratic social engineering and traditional patron-client networks left the Central Asian republics without genuine independent state experience [11]. Their independence was accidental-an outcome of Soviet collapse rather than national liberation [10].

The new elites were Soviet-educated technocrats with little pan-Turkic or pan-Islamic sentiment. Taught about the "failure of capitalism," they had identified with the Second World [3;10]. After 1991, they began constructing states according to their own pragmatic designs. Importantly, many of them, including Kazakhstan's leadership rejected an exclusively Asian identity, preferring to view their countries as links between East and West [10; 3; 2]. Concepts such as "Great Silk Road states" and the "Eurasian Bridge" emerged from this intellectual milieu.

Kazakhstan's ruling elite was deeply integrated into the Soviet hierarchy. The former leader, Dinmuhamed Konaev was a long-serving member of the Politburo and a close associate of the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev [10]. He was accused of corruption and replaced in 1986. The Soviet authority made the same accusation earlier in Uzbekistan (removal of Rashidov) and Karakalpakstan. These changes caused a protest in Almaty and young Kazakh people came out to the streets on December 17-18, 1986. [1; 2]. The unrest presaged the rise of new local elites who would later lead the independent republics.

When Nazarbayev was elected president by 98.9 percent of voters in 1991, Kazakhstan faced massive uncertainty. Economic ties to the Soviet market were severed; industrial supply chains and transport routes were broken; and demographic diversity, including a large Slavic population in the north, posed potential instability [10; 30]. To navigate this environment, Nazarbayev prioritized social stability and inter-ethnic harmony, while seeking cooperation without subordination to Russia [30]. His government opened the resource sector to foreign investors to overcome the economic crisis, and it promoted a policy of multi-vector foreign relations [17].

Kazakhstan's early foreign policy doctrine rested on geopolitical realities, including territory, ethnic composition, landlocked position and proximity to major powers. As Kasenov argued, Kazakhstan's security could not rely on military power alone and required diversified external relations and economic integration [22].

1.2 Origins and Interpretations of Eurasianism in Kazakhstan

The idea of Eurasianism, central to Kazakhstan's emerging self-image in the 1990s, has long carried dual meanings: one geographic, one politico-philosophical. In its broadest geographic

sense, Eurasianism simply refers to the vast landmass spanning Europe and Asia. Early geopolitical thinkers like Halford Mackinder famously conceptualized the Eurasian heartland as the strategic “pivot” of history [26]. In the 20th century, Russian émigré intellectuals and their later followers developed Eurasianism into a political-cultural doctrine. They assert that Russia’s civilization blends European and Asian elements and that Russia is destined to lead the Eurasian continent. Lev Gumilev argued that Russia’s culture blended European and Asian elements and was shaped by both Christianity and Islam [16].

Kazakhstan’s interpretation of Eurasianism, however, diverged sharply from the Russian version. Nazarbayev reimagined Eurasia not as a Russian-led space but as a common space in which Kazakhstan would act as a bridge between equal partners [10]. In his vision, articulated as early as the mid-1990s, Eurasianism was stripped of any implication of Russian hegemony and instead emphasized sovereign equality and integration among all Eurasian states. As Mostafa notes, Eurasianism is a multidimensional concept that different actors have reinterpreted over time [27]. While the Russian variant stresses hierarchy and Moscow-centric unity, the Kazakhstani variant stresses connectivity, balance, and partnership among peers. In Kazakhstan’s discourse, Eurasianism denotes bridging, not belonging. The country’s role is to connect various civilizations and great powers, rather than to declare allegiance to any one bloc or to dominate others. This crucial interpretive difference helps explain why Kazakhstan’s Eurasian initiative gained international acceptance as a pragmatic, inclusive framework, in contrast to Russian Eurasianism which is often viewed as an ideological or neo-imperial project.

The intellectual seed of Kazakhstan’s Eurasianism can be traced to the early independence period. After 1991, Central Asian elites—largely Soviet-educated technocrats with little pan-Turkic or pan-Islamic inclination—found themselves seeking new national ideologies to legitimize their rule. Many, including Nazarbayev, were reluctant to define their states as exclusively “Asian” or to sever ties with the broader international community. Instead, they preferred to cast their countries as links between East and West. Concepts such as the revival of the “Great Silk Road” and the notion of a “Eurasian Bridge” emerged from this milieu, reflecting an impulse to leverage geography as a positive identity asset [17; 7].

In Kazakhstan’s context, Nazarbayev articulated this idea most explicitly by arguing that the newly independent state, having rejected the flawed foundations of totalitarianism, was undertaking a distinctive role: to promote balanced and harmonious development among all national cultures while bridging two broader conceptual and cultural spheres of the contemporary world. In this sense, he presented it as a practical expression of the Eurasian idea [28].

Nazarbayev’s seminal Moscow State University speech in 1994 marked the public launch of Kazakhstan’s Eurasianism. In that address, he proposed the creation of a “Eurasian Union” grounded in economic and security cooperation among post-Soviet states. This proposal drew directly on Kazakhstan’s unique geostrategic position and multiethnic composition [27]. Nazarbayev reinforced the concept in subsequent strategy documents, most notably the Kazakhstan-2030 development strategy unveiled in 1997 [28]. In Kazakhstan-2030, he explicitly cast Kazakhstan’s historic mission as joining “two conceptual and emotional contexts of the modern world,” after having rejected the “false principles of totalitarianism” of the past. By this account, Kazakhstan was executing a “unique function” in ensuring the harmonious development of all its national cultures within a broader “system of world culture”. This vivid language essentially elevated the Eurasian idea to the level of national ideology [28].

In summary, during the 1990s, Nazarbayev repurposed Eurasianist thought to craft a new national ideology for Kazakhstan. He fused geography with ideology: Kazakhstan would be neither fully European nor Asian, but a hybrid nation bridging the two. This identity was as much inward-facing (to forge unity in a diverse society) as outward-facing (to guide foreign relations). By integrating geopolitical and geocultural dimensions, the Eurasian concept could promote internal cohesion and external cooperation simultaneously. The conceptual evolution was thus one of Eurasianism-from-above: an elite-driven narrative that redefined Kazakhstan's post-Soviet identity in inclusive and pragmatic terms [3].

1.3 Focus on Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy Behavior

While many studies address Central Asia as a region, several scholars have examined Kazakhstan as a distinct case. The literature on Kazakhstan can broadly be grouped into four strands:

- (a) the institutionalization and political regime [11];
 - (b) identity and nation-building [3]; and
 - (c) specific social and cultural themes, including language, rural life, and symbolic politics [3].
- (d) a number of works also link Kazakhstan's foreign policy to questions of identity, ideology, and geopolitical orientation [2; 19].

Geographic proximity to Russia and deep historical ties has produced reciprocal perceptions that shape both sides' foreign-policy conduct. The country's landlocked geography, position between Russia and China, and reliance on neighbors for trade routes are key elements of its strategic calculus [11; 19; 23]. These same factors underlie the emergence of Kazakhstan's Eurasian Bridge concept [11].

Cummings argues that ideological determinants, such as Eurasianism, gain instrumental value under two conditions: (1) when established values are challenged, and (2) when the political system is highly centralized. Both applied to post-Soviet Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which responded to the collapse of communism through pragmatic rather than ideological politics. Nazarbayev's rhetoric of multi-vectorism and peaceful diplomacy reflects this action-oriented pragmatism. [11].

Kazakh elites and the broader public tend to view themselves as secular, pragmatic, and "Eurasian", celebrating hospitality and hierarchy as national virtues [11]. Nazarbayev's snow leopard imagery conveyed a preference for restrained strength rather than aggression [29]. Nazarbayev often referred to both Turkic origins and blood ties with Russia, positioning Eurasianism as a convenient middle ground between these identities [28; 11]. Unlike the Russian version, which emphasized a shared Eurasian civilization, Kazakhstan's Eurasianism prioritized economic cooperation and balance over ideology [11].

Anceschi similarly argues that regimes can reshape public behavior through foreign policy, while Cummings and Anceschi note that charismatic leadership and an apolitical population facilitated this convergence [3; 11; 20]. In Kazakhstan, leadership skillfully leveraged domestic and external pressures to forge a stable identity. Anceschi later contends that Eurasianism has become central to Kazakhstan's interpretation of its history and geopolitical challenges, underpinning its multilateralism and accommodating its multi-ethnic composition [4].

Recent scholarship further emphasizes the agency of leadership in Kazakhstan's foreign policy. Leadership decision-making served as a crucial bridge between systemic constraints and state responses. Anceschi extends this argument, suggesting that neo-Eurasianism has

served shifting purposes—from legitimizing leadership to balancing autonomy from Russia while maintaining economic ties [4]. These analyses highlight the President’s central role in Kazakhstan’s foreign-policy behavior and suggest that further research on leadership psychology and decision-making could deepen understanding of how identity and pragmatism intertwine in Kazakhstan’s diplomacy.

Scholarship on post-Soviet Central Asia has long emphasized the region’s geopolitical “in betweenness” between Russia and China and its exposure to great power competition, often framed as a “new Great Game” [2; 8; 12]. Within this setting, Kazakhstan stands out for having articulated an explicit Eurasian identity project that links state building at home with foreign policy positioning abroad. Early speeches by President Nursultan Nazarbayev cast Kazakhstan as a “Eurasian state” and “bridge” between East and West, embedding Eurasianism into the very narrative of sovereign statehood after 1991 [28]. Studies of Kazakhstan’s evolving “geopolitical code” demonstrate how this leadership-driven discourse sought to reconcile proximity to Russia with aspirations for global integration and multi-vector diplomacy [2].

The literature suggests that Eurasianism remains a contested discursive field in which Russian and Kazakhstani actors advance different visions of order, sovereignty and integration [33; 19]. The literature therefore suggests that “Eurasia” functions less as a shared geopolitical project than as a discursive arena in which different actors (Russian, Kazakhstani, and Western) advance competing visions of regional order.

2. Methodology: discourse-based role reconstruction

(a) Using leadership discourse as data

Methodologically, the article proceeds from the assumption, shared by much foreign policy analysis and discourse analytic work, that public speeches, strategy documents, and interviews constitute a primary site where leaders articulate national roles and justify foreign policy choices [6]. As Carta and Narminio argue, foreign policy discourse performs framing, generative and legitimating functions. It not only describes but actively helps constitute the “self” and “others” of foreign policy, linking domestic and international levels of analysis [6]. Similarly, role analytic studies have long relied on content analysis of leaders’ statements to infer national role conceptions [18]. In line with this approach, the present study draws on close reading of presidential addresses (n=50 key speeches delivered by Nursultan Nazarbayev), as well as foundational strategy texts such as “Kazakhstan 2030,” official foreign policy concepts. These are coupled with secondary scholarship on Kazakhstani Eurasianism, regime legitimation, and regional diplomacy [2; 20]. The aim is not to reconstruct Nazarbayev’s private beliefs, but to identify stable patterns in the publicly performed self-ascription of roles and to relate these to observable foreign policy behavior. [6; 18; 5].

(b) Limitations and scope conditions

The reliance on elite/leaders discourse inevitably comes with limitations. In highly centralized, highly centralized political systems such as Kazakhstan, access to internal deliberations and dissenting elite views is restricted, and public texts are often carefully curated [20]. As a result, the analysis captures the leadership’s official narrative rather than the full spectrum of domestic contestation around Kazakhstan’s international identity [13]. Nevertheless, consistent with standard role analytic and discourse analytic practice, public speeches and strategic documents provide indispensable evidence on how the regime itself chooses to represent its national role to both internal and external audiences [6].

3. Conceptual Framework

3.1 Role Theory and National Role Conceptions

Role theory in foreign policy analysis provides a useful lens for understanding how state identities shape behavior. Kalevi Holsti introduced the concept of National Role Conceptions (NRCs) to describe policymakers' own definitions of their state's identity, purpose, and appropriate behavior on the world stage [18]. Following Holsti's classic formulation, national role conceptions are understood here as decision-makers' own definitions of the appropriate purposes, commitments, and behaviors of their state in the international system, which then serve as guidelines for action in foreign policy [18]. Rather than treating roles as mere reflections of material capabilities, recent work emphasizes their ideational and interpretive dimension. Leaders draw on historical experience, domestic identity work, and external expectations to construct relatively durable role scripts that filter how they read threats and opportunities [18; 35; 5]. In this perspective, Kazakhstan's "Eurasian Bridge" is treated as such a leadership-defined national role conception that structures foreign-policy choices without fully determining them [18].

According to Naomi Wish, once established, national role conceptions tend to provide long-standing guidelines or standards for behavior [35]. Their longevity and stability mean that an NRC can consistently orient a state's foreign-policy choices even amid changing external circumstances. In the case of Kazakhstan, as this article will show, the leadership's articulation of a Eurasian "bridge" role became a durable guiding idea that shaped two decades of foreign policy. The Role theory framework thus links role formation (how Kazakhstan sees itself) with foreign-policy behavior (how it acts internationally). This approach posits that if Kazakhstan's leadership constructed Eurasianism as the core of the national role, then foreign policy would logically be directed toward enacting that role. Indeed, Holsti anticipated that national role conceptions manifest not only in discourse but also in concrete policy actions [18]. The following sections examine how Nazarbayev's regime formulated such a role conception around Eurasianism and operationalized it in practice.

3.2 The "Eurasian Bridge" as Kazakhstan's National Role Conception

Within Holsti's typology, this article draws particularly on the idea of 'bridge' and 'mediator integrator' roles [18; 35]. Holsti's original typology already envisaged bridge and mediator integrator roles, in which states see themselves as connectors across regional or ideological divides and as facilitators of cooperation in their surroundings [18; 35]. Subsequent role analytic work has shown that such roles are not confined to great powers. Small and medium sized states can strategically embrace niche roles-norm entrepreneurs, mediators, regional stabilizers-to leverage limited capabilities into disproportionate diplomatic influence [5]. Kazakhstan's self-presentation as a peaceful, modernizing state, linking Europe and Asia and promoting dialogue among civilizations, fits closely with this bridge/mediator integrator cluster. It combines a strong emphasis on cooperation and multilateralism with an identity narrative that stresses cultural hybridity and geographic in-betweenness.

This role conception operates simultaneously at the domestic and international levels. It frames Kazakhstan's identity as one of "in-betweenness" – neither purely European nor purely Asian, but uniquely positioned to connect both [2; 12].

This positional identity helps distinguish Kazakhstan's Eurasianism from Russian or even Turkish variants. For Russia, Eurasianism historically implied centrality and control. For Turkey,

it sometimes evokes a Turkic leadership role or kinship in Central Asia. In contrast, Kazakhstan's Eurasian Bridge concept stresses connectivity, equilibrium, and inclusivity, reflecting the country's geography and multi-ethnic society [10; 27]. Nazarbayev's articulation of the role combined political pragmatism with civilizational imagination. Domestically, it linked the idea of Kazakhstan as a multiethnic space with the regime's legitimacy agenda [28]. Internationally, it provided a rationale for multi-vector diplomacy – maintaining constructive relations with all major powers without becoming subordinate to any [17].

Several analysts have identified the objectives embedded in Nazarbayev's discourse. These include:

- (a) fostering economic integration and peaceful relations with great-power neighbors (to ensure development and avoid isolation);
- (b) accommodating Kazakhstan's multi-ethnic population by constructing an inclusive civic identity (to prevent ethnic strife);
- (c) establishing a civic national identity that transcends ethnic divisions (often referred to as the "Kazakhstani" identity); and
- (d) leveraging the country's geographic location to prevent external domination or internal fragmentation [30; 10; 27].

In sum, the Eurasian Bridge role was not mere rhetoric – it was a strategic framework that linked domestic consolidation to external cooperation, guiding the pattern of behavior that became Kazakhstan's hallmark in foreign affairs.

By reframing Eurasianism as a national role, Nazarbayev gave it practical operability. This self-conception resonated with Kazakhstan's needs in the 1990s: to preserve sovereignty amid powerful neighbors, to attract investment and security guarantees from multiple directions, and to maintain internal stability in a multiethnic society. The Eurasian Bridge narrative justified policies to those ends. It provided an ideational compass for Kazakhstan's foreign policy, ensuring that day-to-day decisions remained aligned with the broader identity the leadership promoted. The consistent invocation of this role in speeches, strategy documents, and educational curricula indicates how deeply it became entrenched in Kazakhstan's strategic culture by the 2000s.

3.3 National Role Conception and Multivectorism

A closely related concept and the primary operationalization of the Eurasian Bridge role - is Kazakhstan's doctrine of "multi-vector" foreign policy. In practice, multi-vector diplomacy has been the strategy by which the Eurasian Bridge identity is enacted. The term multi-vector was first introduced by Nazarbayev in 1992, when he described Kazakhstan's desired post-Cold War posture as balanced "between East and West" [17; 7]. At its core, the multi-vector principle aimed to secure maximum benefit for Kazakhstan by engaging with all major powers and regional blocs. Thereby mitigating geopolitical risks and avoiding overdependence on any single partner. In the turbulent post-Soviet environment-marked by the "great power contest" in Central Asia - such an approach promised to preserve Kazakhstan's autonomy and attract economic gains [8; 17].

Figure 1 illustrates how Eurasianism as an ideational foundation evolves into Kazakhstan's "Eurasian Bridge" national role conception. This, in turn, produces multi-vector foreign-policy behavior balancing major powers while promoting cooperation and mediation.

Figure 1. Conceptual Linkage.

Conceptual Linkage: From Eurasianism to Multi-Vector Foreign Policy



Source: Author's own interpretation according to the Holsti's NRCs (18).

Scholars have analyzed Kazakhstan's multi-vector policy from various theoretical angles. We can identify at least following interpretations in the literature:

- (1) a rationalist cost-benefit calculus (emphasizing pragmatic self-interest in diversifying partners) [17];
- (2) a bargaining model of small-state behavior (whereby Kazakhstan maximizes leverage by playing external powers against each other) [15];
- (3) a co-alignment or issue-specific alignment strategy (forming flexible partnerships on different issues rather than permanent blocs) [7]; and
- (4) a form of defensive balancing to offset the influence of any one great power[32].

For instance, Hanks views multi-vectorism through a realist lens as a series of pragmatic trade-offs-Kazakhstan balancing domestic priorities with external pressures to ensure regime survival [17]. Gnedina, examining a similar policy in Ukraine, argues that multi-vector states "neither balance nor bandwagon" but rather bargain with all sides to extract benefits, preferring flexibility over firm commitments [15]. Her insight underscores that multi-vectorism is not about indecision but about active maneuvering. A point that likely applies in the Central Asian context as well. Likewise, Contessi interprets multi-vectorism as a deliberate statecraft strategy of "co-alignments," wherein Kazakhstan engages in selective partnerships (economic with one power, security with another, etc.) to maximize overall gains [7]. Despite differing emphases, these analyses converge on a few key points: multi-vectorism is fundamentally about independence, flexibility, and diversification in foreign relations.

Importantly, Kazakhstani officials have themselves framed multi-vector foreign policy as a natural extension of the country's identity and geopolitical situation. Nazarbayev and his diplomats often presented Kazakhstan's multi-vector approach as a policy of "cooperation and cohabitation" with all major powers [28; 29]. While some outside critics labeled it inconsistent or opportunistic. The Kazakhstani narrative defended multi-vectorism as principled balance – engaging with all the world's leading powers, but allowing no actor to dominate. In essence, multi-vectorism functioned as the diplomatic doctrine born from the Eurasian Bridge role conception. It translated the abstract notion of Kazakhstan's "in-betweenness" into a concrete pattern of state behavior. By remaining deliberately non-aligned and open to multiple partnerships, Kazakhstan could transform its structural vulnerability into a form of agency and resilience.

To summarize, the Eurasian Bridge identity provided the normative justification for Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy. While multi-vectorism provided the practical mechanism to realize the Eurasian Bridge role. The vagueness of the multi-vector concept, sometimes criticized by analysts, actually contributed to its success. It gave Kazakhstan freedom to adapt to changing circumstances without abandoning its core role identity. In the big picture, this doctrinal flexibility was central to Kazakhstan's foreign-policy model and became one of the defining features of its international persona in the Nazarbayev era.

Seen through a small/mid-sized state diplomacy lens, Kazakhstan's Eurasian Bridge role provides an ideational foundation for its well-known strategy of multivector foreign policy. Rather than simple hedging or bandwagoning, multivectorism can be read as a role consistent effort to embed Kazakhstan simultaneously in Russian-led, Chinese-led, Western, and regional institutions. Thereby maximizing autonomy while avoiding exclusive alignment with any single patron. In this sense, the Eurasian Bridge role functions as a cognitive and justificatory script that links Kazakhstan's material vulnerabilities as a landlocked, mid-sized post-Soviet state to a proactive, diplomatic strategy.

4. Results and Discussion

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that by framing Kazakhstan as a "Eurasian Bridge," the leadership linked the pragmatic necessities of survival in a complex neighborhood with an identity narrative emphasizing peace, mediation, and integration. In other words, identity and realpolitik were fused into a single strategy.

The empirical analysis of Nursultan Nazarbayev's speeches (n= 50) shows that the most frequently mentioned items were mainly ideational (the category "other"). The categories of "economy", "integration" and "security" were mentioned to a lesser degree. This means that topics such as "Eurasian" state, "civilizational dialogue between the states", and "peaceful coexistence" were discussed more than others.

Then, the preceding analysis shows a high degree of consistency between Nazarbayev's Eurasianist discourse and Kazakhstan's foreign policy behavior. This role is not enacted in a vacuum, but under institutional and structural constraints that generate tensions and tradeoffs.

At the same time, the Eurasian Bridge conception has generated significant role strain, particularly in Kazakhstan's economic and security integration with Russia. The launch of the Customs Union and later the EAEU exposed Astana to asymmetric shocks and regulatory frictions that sat uneasily with its rhetoric of sovereign equality [24]. The 2014–2015-ruble crisis and Western sanctions on Russia led to a sharp depreciation of the ruble, undercutting Kazakh producers with a surge of cheap Russian imports and forcing repeated devaluations of the tenge. Domestic criticism of "importing" Russian problems intensified, and Nazarbayev

publicly insisted that the EAEU was a purely economic project and that Kazakhstan reserved the right to withdraw if its independence were threatened [24; 25]. Similar tensions surfaced in intra EAEU disputes over tariffs, border frictions, and Russia's unilateral countersanctions, which disrupted regional trade but were politically costly for Astana to oppose openly [25]. From a role theoretical perspective, these episodes exemplify how a state committed to a bridge/mediator role must constantly reconcile overlapping expectations. Deep institutional engagement with a dominant neighbour, protection of domestic economic and sovereignty interests, and maintenance of a multivector image vis à vis other partners [18].

4.1 Domestic legitimation and authoritarian resilience

The Eurasian Bridge role has also been central to domestic legitimation. Nazarbayev's image as "Leader of the Nation" is closely tied to narratives of successful nation building, inter-ethnic stability, and international prestige [21]. High-profile initiatives-hosting OSCE and EXPO summits, convening interreligious congresses, and championing Eurasian integration-are routinely presented as evidence that Kazakhstan is recognized globally, which in turn validates the regime's performance at home. These moves exemplify what Del Sordi terms "dynamic legitimation" in which external praise and institutional status are fed back into domestic narratives of competence and indispensability. This reinforced the link between foreign policy success and regime stability without the need for overt ideological mobilization [13].

4.2 Structural constraints on agency

Finally, the enactment of the Eurasian Bridge role is conditioned by structural constraints in Kazakhstan's regional environment. As Cooley and Costa Buranelli argue, Central Asian regimes operate within a dense web of great power pressures, economic asymmetries, and informal transnational networks that limit their autonomy even as they seek to project agency [8; 9]. Kazakhstan's landlocked geography, dependence on hydrocarbon exports, and embeddedness in Russian transport and energy infrastructures mean that its mediating diplomacy often takes the form of calibrated soft balancing and "quiet hedging," rather than open contestation [34]. The Eurasian Bridge role, therefore, cannot be read as a purely voluntarist construct. Rather, it is an adaptive script that allows Astana to navigate, and partially re-interpret, the structural dilemmas.

From an internal perspective, Eurasianism provided the ideational foundation for Kazakhstan's state-building and regime legitimacy. By presenting Kazakhstan's nationhood as inherently Eurasian and inclusive, the leadership converted what could have been sources of division (ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences) into pillars of a unique national idea. The Eurasian Bridge narrative thus reinforced domestic stability and justified the centralized presidential system as the guardian of interethnic peace.

Externally, the same Eurasianist role conception justified a foreign policy of multi-vector balance and non-alignment. Kazakhstan's refusal to cast any great power as an adversary and its effort to maintain constructive relations with all had a clear rationale in its self-portrayal as a bridge state. This role enabled Kazakhstan to punch above its weight in international affairs. The country positioned itself as a mediator and convener, hosting talks (for example, on Syria in the Astana Process in 2017, beyond our period but rooted in this identity) and leading regional confidence-building efforts. Participation in both Eurasian and Euro-Atlantic institutions, such as simultaneously engaging in the EAEU, WTO, SCO, and OSCE-was not seen as contradictory but rather as evidence of Kazakhstan's bridging capacity. This approach yielded tangible benefits. Kazakhstan attracted substantial foreign investment from the West (especially in oil and gas),

security assistance and training from NATO countries, and also enjoyed preferential trade and migration arrangements with Russia and China. Its balanced stance also earned the country a reputation as a responsible international actor, culminating in its election as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for 2017–2018 (just beyond our study’s timeframe). That achievement was often credited to Kazakhstan’s image as a bridge between worlds.

To illustrate how Kazakhstan’s Eurasianist role manifested across different dimensions of policy. Each dimension reflects how the national role conception translates into policy and image.

Table 1: Key Indicators of Kazakhstan’s Eurasian Bridge Role Conception in Foreign Policy (1991-2019).

Key Indicators of Kazakhstan's Eurasian Bridge Role Conception in Foreign Policy (1991–2019)

DIMENSION	INDICATORS OF EURASIAN BRIDGE ROLE	ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES
Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-image as a connector “<i>in-betweenness Europe and Asia</i>”; Intercultural and inter-religious accord as core values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the phrase “<i>Heart of Eurasia</i>” in official discourse; Hosting the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in Astana (promoting a “<i>dialogue of civilizations</i>”); Nazarbayev’s description of Kazakhstan as a “<i>peaceful buffer state</i>”
Policy Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multi-vector diplomacy; Diversification of partnerships; Principle of equality among major powers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “<i>Relations with all the world’s leading powers, but no actor will dominate</i>” (Strategy Kazakhstan-2030); Simultaneous strategic partnerships with Russia, China, U.S., EU, Turkey, etc.; Balanced rhetoric in international fora (<i>no bloc politics</i>)
Security Framing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasis on regional, non-state threats; Avoidance of military blocs or enemy images; Cooperative security initiatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refusal to host foreign bases or join alliances against any neighbor; Doctrine of “<i>common regional security issues</i>” — e.g., counterterrorism seen as a shared Eurasian challenge; Initiation of CICA for multilateral security dialogue
Symbolic Enactment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spatial and institutional embodiment of the bridge identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relocation of the capital to Astana (<i>geographical repositioning to the center</i>); Naming of institutions (e.g., <i>L.N. Gumilev Eurasian National University, Eurasian Development Bank</i>); Leadership in Eurasian integration bodies bridging East–West (<i>Customs Union, EAEU</i>) and <i>OSCE Chairmanship (2010)</i>

Source: Author’s own interpretation according to Holsti’s NRCs [18].

Overall, the distinction between Kazakhstani and Russian Eurasianism remained a critical factor in the success of Kazakhstan’s role. Kazakhstan’s Eurasianism was outwardly non-threatening – it did not seek to revise the international order or create exclusive blocs, which made it palatable to a wide range of partners. Russian Eurasianism, by contrast, was often perceived as anti-Western or neo-imperial, limiting its appeal beyond certain ideological circles. Kazakhstan managed to navigate this by continually affirming that its Eurasian initiatives

were about bridging rather than building blocks. This helped the country avoid backlash and instead gain recognition (for instance, the OSCE summit it hosted in 2010 was attended by both Western and Eastern leaders, validating its bridge role). The Eurasian project launched by Kazakhstan was thus generally seen as a pragmatic diplomatic framework rather than an ideological campaign.

From a role theory standpoint, Kazakhstan under Nazarbayev offers a vivid example of how leaders can translate an abstract idea into a consistent pattern of state behavior. The transformation from Eurasianism-as-concept to Eurasian Bridge-as-role occurred through several reinforcing mechanisms.

- First was spatial translation: the regime leveraged geography (e.g., capital relocation) as a symbolic expression of the new identity.
- Second was institutional translation: Kazakhstan's proactive participation and leadership in regional organizations gave practical substance to its multi-vector, integrative role.
- Third was discursive translation: continuous articulation of Kazakhstan's peace-building, mediator identity in Nazarbayev's speeches, national strategies, and educational narratives ensured that rhetoric and policy moved in tandem.

Together, these mechanisms produced a high degree of coherence between what Kazakhstan said (its role conception discourse) and what it did (its foreign policy actions). This coherence is exactly what role theory would predict. As Holsti and Wish suggest, once a national role conception is adopted, it tends to manifest in both words and deeds. Kazakhstan's case "fulfills" this expectation by showing a strong alignment of identity and behavior over a 25-year period [18; 35].

It should be noted, however, that the Eurasian Bridge role was closely tied to Nazarbayev's personal leadership and the domestic political context of a highly centralized system. Charismatic authority and a lack of organized opposition made it easier for Nazarbayev to impose a single narrative and foreign-policy line [3]. The stability of the role conception owes much to the stability of Nazarbayev's rule. This raises questions about how enduring the role will be in the longer term. Especially after leadership transitions. The evidence up to 2019 suggests that Eurasianism had become institutionalized enough to outlast its architect. Still, further analysis is warranted to see how new leaders reaffirm or reinterpret this national role.

Finally, the Kazakhstan case invites a broader theoretical consideration: How does a small or medium-sized state successfully craft and maintain a national role conception in a volatile region? It appears critical that the role aligns well with both internal needs and external constraints. Eurasianism worked for Kazakhstan because it simultaneously addressed domestic identity dilemmas and exploited geopolitical opportunities. The country's relatively small power capabilities were mitigated by a savvy use of ideology and diplomacy, turning Kazakhstan's "positional ambiguity" (being in-between great powers) into a source of agency and leverage. In this sense, Kazakhstan's Eurasian Bridge role stands as a distinctive model of small-state diplomacy in the post-Soviet space. It illustrates that even states with constrained material power can, through creative role construction, enhance their international standing and security.

This study underscores the value of role theory in linking identity and foreign policy, and it points toward several avenues for deeper exploration. Future research could undertake comparative analyses of national role conceptions across post-Soviet states. In short, Kazakhstan's experience invites scholars to explore how national role conceptions are formed, sustained, or altered under different domestic and international conditions.

Conclusion

This article has shown how an abstract civilizational idea – Eurasianism – was strategically recast by Kazakhstan’s leadership into a coherent and durable national role conception, the “Eurasian Bridge.” Confronted with the uncertainty of the post-Soviet order, Nazarbayev’s elites used this role to bind together domestic imperatives of ethnic harmony and regime stability with an external orientation of balance, multilateralism, and moderation. Eurasianism was stripped of hierarchical, neo-imperial connotations and reframed as a non-threatening, connective identity. Kazakhstan would be neither purely European nor purely Asian, but a peaceful, integrative state linking the two.

By consistently articulating and institutionalizing this Eurasian Bridge role - in speeches, strategic documents such as “Kazakhstan 2030,” the relocation of the capital to Astana, and the proliferation of “Eurasia” in official nomenclature - Kazakhstan translated geography, culture, and historical memory into strategic assets. The role provided the ideational foundation for multi-vector foreign policy and was enacted through a pattern of behaviors characteristic of a “bridge/mediator integrator”. Over time, this role performance helped Kazakhstan avoid exclusive alignment with any single patron, frame security challenges as regional and collective rather than bilateral. At the same time, cultivate a reputation as a responsible, status-seeking middle power engaged with all major actors while avoiding dependence on any single patron.

Implications

Theoretically, the Kazakh case underscores the value of Role Theory as a mid-range framework that links identity formation to patterned foreign policy behavior. The analysis shows that even under pronounced asymmetries vis à vis Russia and China, a mid-sized, non-Western state can exercise agency by constructing a role. That is simultaneously domestically legitimating and externally acceptable, turning “positional ambiguity” into diplomatic leverage.

For practitioners, Kazakhstan’s experience illustrates both the potential and constraints of “bridge” strategies. A carefully crafted role can stabilize expectations at home, justify diversified alignments abroad, and create room for maneuver amid great power rivalry. At the same time, the discussion of role strain highlights that such strategies depend on continual calibration and can come under stress or role conflict when structural constraints tighten.

Limitations

Several limitations qualify these findings.

First, the study is centered on a single national case, using other Central Asian states primarily as a regional baseline rather than as fully developed comparators. This design allows for detailed process tracing of Kazakhstan’s role construction, but it limits the ability to generalize about “bridge” roles across different contexts.

Second, the analysis is largely leadership and discourse focused. It draws heavily on presidential speeches, strategy documents, and patterns of institutional participation. Indirectly captures societal reception, bureaucratic politics, and sub elite contestation around Eurasianism and multivectorism. While existing work suggests that Eurasianism was broadly woven into Kazakhstan’s state-building narrative, questions remain about how deeply and uniformly the Eurasian Bridge identity has been internalized across society and state institutions.

Third, the temporal scope is bounded. The core empirical window (1991–2019) captures the consolidation of the Eurasian Bridge under Nazarbayev and the early phase of its adaptation under Tokayev. But cannot fully assess the role’s resilience under shifting systemic conditions,

including evolving great power competition and regional security crises. Finally, while the article notes that material factors (hydrocarbon wealth, landlocked geography, dependence on Russian transit) created both opportunities and constraints, it does not systematically model their interaction with ideational variables.

Future research

These limitations point to several avenues for future inquiry.

First, comparative work within Central Asia could examine whether and how other republics have developed their own leadership-defined role conceptions. Systematically incorporating Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan into a role analytic framework would illuminate the conditions under which small and medium sized states in the region converge on complementary roles (e.g., regional stabilizer, neutral buffer, security consumer) or fall into role conflict.

Second, the rise of explicitly regional diplomatic formats - most notably the annual C5 consultative summits - creates an opportunity to study how Kazakhstan's bridge/mediator role is re-negotiated in a purely Central Asian setting where great powers are not physically present at the table. Future research could trace whether Astana's agenda setting on connectivity, water management, and security cooperation in these fora consolidates a distinct "regional bridge" role, and how this interacts with pan Eurasian initiatives such as the EAEU, SCO, and China's Belt and Road.

Third, integrating Role Theory with leadership studies would help connect macro level role scripts with micro level decision styles. Systematically profiling Nazarbayev, Tokayev and key successors, and comparing their traits to observed adjustments in Kazakhstan's role performance, would clarify how different psychological predispositions sustain, recalibrate, or potentially redirect the same inherited role conception.

Fourth, more bottom-up research is needed on domestic reception and contestation of Eurasianism. Survey data, media analysis, and sub-national case studies could reveal how different social groups, rural vs. urban populations, younger generation resist, or reinterpret the Eurasian Bridge narrative, and how this shapes the role's long-term robustness.

Taken together, these lines of inquiry would deepen our understanding of how Kazakhstan's Eurasian Bridge role is maintained, adapted, or transformed as leadership changes and Eurasia's geopolitical landscape evolves. More broadly, they would help specify the conditions under which "bridge" roles allow mid-sized states to convert structural vulnerabilities into enduring diplomatic assets within Central Asia and beyond.

Contribution of the authors:

Bauyrzhankyzy A. – formulation of research goals and objectives, data collection and analysis, preparation of the manuscript in accordance with academic requirements.

Zholmanov A. – analysis of theoretical literature, conceptualization of the study, and application of research methods.

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А. Бауыржанқызы, А. Жолманов

*Қазақстан Республикасы Президентінің жанындағы Мемлекеттік басқару академиясы,
Астана, Қазақстан*

(E-mail: aikyz.bauyrzhankyzy@gmail.com, Azamat.zholmanov@apa.kz)

**Еуразияшылдық пен Рөл теориясы (Role Theory): Қазақстанның сыртқы саясатына
концепциялық пайымдау (1991-2019)**

Аңдатпа. Бұл мақалада Рөл теориясына сүйене отырып, Еуразияшылдық идеясының Қазақстанның ұлттық рөл тұжырымдамасын тәуелсіздіктің шешуші кезеңінде (1991–2019) қалай қалыптастырғаны талданады. Президенттің ресми сөздері, стратегиялық құжаттар және екінші дереккөздер негізінде Н. Назарбаевтың Еуразияшылдықты географиялық атаудан стратегиялық рөлдік бірегейлікке - «Еуразиялық көпірге» қалай айналдырғаны көрсетіледі. Калеви Хольстидің Ұлттық рөлдік (Role Theory) түсініктер тұжырымдамасына сүйене отырып, мақалада Еуразияшылдықтың ішкі этносаралық келісім императивтерін сыртқы тепе-теңдік пен ынтымақтастыққа бағыттаумен ұштастыратын сыртқы саяси рөл ретінде қызмет атқарғаны келтіріледі. Талдау нәтижесінде бұл рөлдік құрылымның Қазақстанның көпвекторлы сыртқы саясатының негізінде жатқандығы, елдің Еуразиялық және Еуроатлантикалық институттармен өзара байланысын айқындағаны және қауіпсіздікті блоктық қарама-қайшылықтан гөрі өңірлік, ортақ сын-қатер ретінде түсіндіруге ықпал еткені айқындалады. Эмпириялық тұрғыдан алғанда, бұл жағдай орта деңгейдегі (mid-sized) мемлекеттің Ресей, Қытай және Батыс арасындағы «аралық» геосаяси орнын медиаторлық рөлге айналдыру қабілетін көрсетеді. Теориялық тұрғыдан мақала Рөл теориясы мен Еуразиядағы шағын мемлекеттердің дипломатиясын интеграциялау арқылы сыртқы саясатты талдауға үлес қосады.

Түйін сөздер: Еуразияшылдық, Қазақстан, Ұлттық рөл тұжырымдамасы, Еуразиялық көпір, көпвекторлы сыртқы саясат, Орталық Азия.

А. Бауыржанқызы, А. Жолманов

*Академия государственного управления при Президенте Республики Казахстан,
Астана, Казахстан*

(E-mail: aikyz.bauyrzhankyzy@gmail.com, Azamat.zholmanov@apa.kz)

Евразийство и Теория ролей (Role theory): концептуальное осмысление внешней политики Казахстана (1991-2019)

Аннотация. В статье с опорой на Теорию Ролей (Role Theory) анализируется, как евразийство сформировало национальную ролевую концепцию Казахстана в ключевые десятилетия его независимости (1991–2019). На основе президентских речей, стратегических документов и вторичных исследований показано, как Президент Нурсултан Назарбаев преобразовал евразийство из географического обозначения в стратегическую ролевую идентичность - «Евразийский мост». Опираясь на концепцию национальных ролевых представлений Калеви Хольсти, статья утверждает, что евразийство функционировало как внешнеполитическая роль, связывавшая внутренние императивы межэтнического согласия с внешней ориентацией на баланс и сотрудничество. Анализ демонстрирует, что данная ролевая конструкция лежала в основе многовекторной внешней политики Казахстана, определяла характер его институциональных связей в евразийских и евроатлантических форматах, а также формировала понимание безопасности как коллективного, регионального вызова, а не блоковой конфронтации. Эмпирически кейс показывает, как государство среднего уровня использовало своё «пограничное» положение между Россией, Китаем и Западом для формирования медиаторской роли. Теоретически статья вносит вклад в анализ внешней политики, демонстрируя, как элитно сформированная цивилизационная идея может трансформироваться в устойчивую национальную ролевую концепцию, и подчеркивая значимость интеграции Теории Ролей с изучением дипломатии малых государств в Евразии.

Ключевые слова: Евразийство, Казахстан, Национальная ролевая концепция, Евразийский мост, многовекторная внешняя политика, Центральная Азия.

Information about authors:

Bauyrzhankyzy A. – PhD, Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, Kazakhstan.

Zholmanov A. – PhD, Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, Kazakhstan.

Бауыржанқызы А. – PhD, Қазақстан Республикасы Президентінің жанындағы Мемлекеттік басқару академиясы, Астана, Қазақстан.

Жолманов А. – PhD, Қазақстан Республикасы Президентінің жанындағы Мемлекеттік басқару академиясы, Астана, Қазақстан.

Бауыржанқызы А. – PhD, Академия государственного управления при Президенте Республики Казахстан, Астана, Казахстан.

Жолманов А. – PhD, Академия государственного управления при Президенте Республики Казахстан, Астана, Казахстан.



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