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Institute of Political Studies
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**Perception of Chinese and Russian Influence in Central
Asia: A Case Study of Kazakhstan's Perspective**

Master's Thesis

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Year of the defence: 2024

Declaration

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In Prague on
April 28, 2024

Roman Leuchter

References

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Abstract

The following master thesis deals with Chinese and Russian influence in Central Asia through a case study of Kazakhstan. Existing literature on the topic mostly addresses Chinese and Russian points of view and their approach towards whole Central Asia. This thesis builds on it by focusing on the most prominent country in the region, Kazakhstan, and the perceptions of China and Russia by the political elites—the president and government—as shown in their official narrative. The attention towards Central Asia has grown in the past few years, especially since the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The start of the invasion is a core point of the thesis, as it compares Kazakh perceptions during a period of one and a half years before and one and a half years after the invasion in order to find out whether the perception in the official narrative has changed or not. The data consists of reports collected from the websites of the Kazakh government and president during the given period. The analysis applies qualitative content analysis, through which it identifies the most significant topics that are perceived with regard to China and Russia. The thesis explores development within these categories. It describes the commonly occurring themes, but at the same time pays high attention to specific non-typical reports, especially those referring to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This case study is analysed in the context of Chinese and Russian influence in Central Asia and Kazakh-Chinese and Kazakh-Russian relations.

Abstrakt

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá čínským a ruským vlivem ve Střední Asii na příkladu Kazachstánu. Stávající literatura k tomuto tématu se většinou zabývá čínským a ruským pohledem a jejich přístupem k celé Střední Asii. Tato práce na ni navazuje tím, že se zaměřuje na nejvýznamnější zemi regionu – Kazachstán – a vnímání Číny a Ruska jejími politickými elitami – prezidentem a vládou – tak, jak to zobrazuje jejich oficiální narativ. Pozornost vůči Střední Asii v posledních letech vzrostla, zejména po ruské invazi na Ukrajinu 24. února 2022. Začátek invaze je stěžejním bodem práce, neboť ta porovnává vnímání Kazachstánu v období roku a půl před invazí a roku a půl po ní s cílem zjistit, zda se vnímání v oficiálním narativu změnilo, či nikoliv. Data sestávají ze zpráv shromážděných z internetových stránek kazašské vlády a prezidenta v daném období. Analýza aplikuje kvalitativní obsahovou analýzu, jejímž prostřednictvím identifikuje nejvýznamnější témata, která jsou vnímána ve vztahu k Číně a Rusku. Práce zkoumá vývoj v rámci těchto tematických kategorií. Popisuje běžně se vyskytující témata, ale zároveň věnuje vysokou pozornost specifickým a netypickým zprávám, zejména těm, které se vztahují k ruské invazi na Ukrajinu. Tato případová studie je analyzována v kontextu čínského a ruského vlivu ve Střední Asii a kazašsko-čínských a kazašsko-ruských vztahů.

Keywords

Kazakhstan, China, Russia, Perception, Central Asia, Influence

Klíčová slova

Kazachstán, Čína, Rusko, Vnímání, Střední Asie, Vliv

Title

Perception of Chinese and Russian Influence in Central Asia: A Case Study of
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Název práce

Vnímání čínského a ruského vlivu ve Střední Asii: případová studie Kazachstánu

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List of Abbreviations

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CA	Central Asia
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CNPC	China National Petroleum Corporation
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EU	European Union
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PRC	People's Republic of China
RF	Russian Federation
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WTO	World Trade Organization

Introduction

This diploma thesis deals with the topic of Chinese and Russian influence in Central Asia (hereinafter CA) through a case study of Kazakhstan's perception of the two powers. The region consists of five countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—and the presence of the People's Republic of China (hereinafter China) and the Russian Federation (hereinafter Russia) has received a lot of scholarly attention in recent years. With the competition between Chinese and Russian influence being the most discussed aspect, little attention has been given to the CA's point of view. Therefore, the thesis centres on the perception of a CA country, the largest one being Kazakhstan. It focuses on the official position of Kazakhstan's foreign policy representatives towards China and Russia in times of rising geopolitical tensions and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Qualitative content analysis of reports on the official websites of Kazakhstan's president and government is conducted.

The phenomenon of great powers' influence in foreign countries is highly relevant in international relations and is often discussed in the case of CA. Since the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (hereinafter USSR), the region has been subject to Russian influence. However, its second powerful neighbour, China, has been gradually increasing its power and presence there as well. Today, both China and Russia possess significant influence in CA, and observers discuss how their relations are evolving, whether it is more of a clash or convergence. The choice of case study of Kazakhstan is given by the fact that it is the largest, most developed, and politically and economically most significant country in the region. Some researchers studying CA call it the "unofficial leader of the region" (Wang and Zhuravleva, 2015). Kazakhstan practices *multi-vector* foreign policy with the aim of maintaining good and pragmatic relations with all countries while staying under Russian influence since its independence. In the past years, Kazakhstan's relations with China have intensified as well, especially their economic ties. In the beginning of the 2000s, Kazakhstan became the first CA country to have an oil pipeline connected to China, and in 2013, China launched the *Silk Road Economic Belt*, the continental part of the *Belt and Road Initiative* (hereinafter BRI), in Kazakhstan. BRI is a

comprehensive Chinese infrastructure and economic development strategy consisting of investments in infrastructure projects abroad and enhancing economic partnerships.

The geopolitical situation regarding China and Russia and their tensions with the West have intensified in the past few years. In 2014, Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimea and supported pro-Russian separatists fighting Ukraine forces in Donbas, which led to a deterioration of Russian relations with the West. Later, especially since the United States (hereinafter US) under Donald Trump's presidency initiated a trade war in 2018, western countries' ties with China have begun to worsen as well. Finally, on February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and its relations with many countries around the world deteriorated dramatically. Consequently, Russia has become much closer to China.

The Russian invasion is a significant geopolitical moment around which the thesis is centered. The focus of the analysis is Kazakhstan's perception of China and Russia before and after the invasion, to discover whether the perception has changed and how. There are two main reasons for choosing this time point: first, the geopolitical significance. Since the war began, a lot of international attention (by governments, journalists, academics, and others) has concentrated on countries' stances towards this conflict, whether they support Russia or Ukraine. Russia has become a pariah in many parts of the world (especially in the West), and this war has significantly intensified the polarisation of the world between the West on one side and Russia and China (and their allies) on the other. Secondly, Kazakhstan, as a post-Soviet country bordering Russia, shares a similar position to Ukraine. It is trying to establish its own independent national identity in the face of Russian imperial ambitions to maintain its dominance in the post-Soviet region.

The research target of this thesis is to study the perception of Chinese and Russian influence in the discourse of Kazakhstan's political representatives. It is important to study Kazakhstan's perception, as it brings insight into Kazakh foreign policy and helps us understand the situation of international relations within CA, which is especially important with regard to China and Russia due to the recent geopolitical development.

The research question is to find out how China and Russia are perceived in the official narrative of Kazakhstan's political elites, namely the president and government, as pictured in reports on their official websites. How has this narrative evolved over a period of one and a half years before and one and a half years after the Russian invasion of Ukraine? Did the invasion have an impact on perception? What are the main areas in which Kazakhstan's political elites address China and Russia?

The perception is studied following Alexander Wendt's social constructivist approach. The analysed reports often respond to actual events, such as meetings of officials, etc. Perception is understood as being constituted by real-life events in international politics and, at the same time, constituting it further. The reason for studying the discourse of political representatives is that, first, it allows us to explore the official position of Kazakhstan. Secondly, it is not easily possible to study independent perspectives in Kazakhstan, as freedom of speech is suppressed and the media landscape is state-affiliated. As stated by Reporters Without Borders, the "media are essentially a propaganda outlet for the Kazakh regime" (RSF, n.d.). According to Freedom House, political rights and civil liberties remained very low in 2022, and Kazakhstan was ranked as "not free" (Freedom House, n.d.).

1. Literature Review

A lot of scholarly attention has been attracted to the Chinese and Russian influence in CA and the situation of international relations in the region. In this section, an overview of the most relevant academic literature regarding framing topics for the thesis is provided. It begins with a review of the literature on the broad topic of Chinese and Russian influence in CA – and then moves to the literature more closely related to the analysis: Kazakhstan's relations to China and Russia and Kazakhstan's perception.

1.1 Chinese and Russian Influence in Central Asia

Over the past years, extensive scholarly literature has been dedicated to examining the influence of China and Russia in CA, their interactions with countries in the region, and the dynamics of competition or cooperation among them. Recently, the topic has also received increased attention from the news media and think tanks. The reason for that is the growing political and economic power of China compared to Russia and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In the scope of academic literature and other studies, most authors focus on two aspects of Chinese and Russian influence in CA: economic and security/military spheres. This holds significant relevance for the analysis, given that themes of economic and security cooperation occur in the analysed data and play a significant part. Some authors have claimed that the relationship between China and Russia in CA is a “division of labor”—China dominates economic cooperation, while Russia dominates security domains (Paszak 2020; Kazantsev, Medvedeva, and Safranchuk, 2021). However, the situation is developing, and scholars have various opinions on this issue.

Within the sphere of economic cooperation and influence, researchers commonly examine the role of the multilateral platforms of the Chinese BRI and the Russian *Eurasian Economic Union* (hereinafter EAEU). This is exemplified in the study by Makocki and Popescu (2016), which delves into how China and Russia leverage these frameworks to advance their influence and concludes that China is slowly pushing out traditionally dominant Russia. Alexander Cooley (2015) observes the increase in Chinese economic involvement with BRI and the deepening of Russian security cooperation. He notices that

although China and Russia are partners in the region, Russia must follow China's terms of cooperation, especially since the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Egorycheva (2019) compares the data on the development of Russian and Chinese trade with CA countries and states that trade with both, especially China, increases, and therefore China's influence in the region is strengthening. Her findings suggest Russia and China are mere competitors in CA. Gabuev (2016) also focuses on the economic aspects and roles of BRI and EAEU. He does not agree that China and Russia are only adversaries and claims there are efforts to accommodate mutual interests, which are hard to achieve for many practical reasons.

Mirza and Ayub (2021) claim that Chinese economic influence can transfer to political one and threaten Russian positions in the region. Kazantsev, Medvedeva, and Safranchuk (2021) examine the role of BRI within Chinese engagement in the region. They also include the EAEU, but rather stress military and political integration with Russia. Clarke's (2020) study focuses mainly on BRI and Chinese influence in the region. Hofstee and Broeders (2020) evaluate several aspects of the relationship: political, economic, military, and cultural. They see the situation in the region as a balance of power between China and Russia, with a likelihood of increased cooperation in the near future.

The majority of studies draw on realist theoretical approaches, focusing on great powers' balancing, their relationship (partnership or competition), and their power projection upon weaker states (Wilhelmsen and Flikke, 2011; Cooley, 2015; Makocki and Popescu, 2016; Gabuev, 2016). E.g., Rashid and Tahir (2021) analyse the balance between China and Russia, adopting the neorealist perspective. Similarly, Hofstee and Broeders (2020) examine the dynamics of balancing between the two powers in CA. Pizzolo and Carteny (2022) adopt the Power Transition Theory to study Chinese-Russian rivalry. A slightly different approach presents Liselotte (2017) using the English school. She analyses the "strategic partnership" between China and Russia based on their policies in CA. However, the application of a constructivist approach is lacking.

Most of the literature deals with Chinese and Russian influence in the whole CA region and does not focus on single cases of CA countries. One such case study is an article by Muratalieva, Esenbekova, and Tatkalo (2022) dealing with the increasing Chinese influence in the security sphere in Kyrgyzstan. The authors describe the expansion of Chinese-Kyrgyz security relations, Chinese influence in this sphere, and how it challenges Russian dominance in the country. The case study explores only the security dimension and suggests a competition between the two powers.

Another prevailing aspect of the majority of literature is the lack of studies focusing on the perspective of CA nations. Piper (2022) points out that the active role of CA countries towards China and Russia is generally under-researched. An exception is the paper by Kazantsev, Medvedeva, and Safranchuk (2021), who consider CA states to be active in the formation of relations between CA and China and Russia.

Another aspect to keep in mind is the date of publication of the literature, since the thesis focuses on the time around the launch of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. There has been a lack of academic papers dealing with Russia and China in CA since February 2022. However, the issue is discussed in think tank publications. For example, Sciorati and Ambrosetti (2023) claim China is doing better in CA because of its bilateral approach, but China and Russia seem to coordinate. Furthermore, news media have been bringing reports about the decrease of Russian and increase of Chinese influence in CA since the Russian invasion (Imamova, 2023; Leahy, 2023).

1.2 Kazakhstan's Perception

In the context of Kazakhstan and its perception of China or Russia, there have been two noteworthy studies. In their article, Wang and Zhuravleva (2015) study Chinese and Russian soft power in Kazakhstan. They compare projections of soft power by the two powers and conclude that while Russia has been more successful, China is also not lagging behind. However, they still focus on China and Russia as the active actors and measure their power, whereas Kazakhstan remains a passive subject.

A study by Burkahov and Chen (2016) is closer to the approach of this thesis as it analyses Kazakhstan's perception. It is different from all the other literature mentioned, as Burkahov and Chen (2016) do not address the perceptions of both China and Russia but only of China. They conduct discourse analysis of Kazakh media, studying Kazakh perceptions of China, the Chinese, and Chinese migration. Burkahov and Chen (2016) analysed articles in Kazakh media in the period 2013–2015 before and after Xi Jinping's visit to Kazakhstan and giving a speech and found out that the speech did not influence Kazakh perceptions significantly. In this thesis, a similar approach is applied by analysing perceptions in a period before and after an influencing event—the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Another related study is by Arynov (2023), who analyses the perceptions of Kazakh students who studied in China. This study is, however, more narrowly focused on a specific group of people and their perceptions, and similarly to Burkahov and Chen, only with regard to China.

1.3 Research Gap

The existing literature on Chinese and Russian influence in CA and relations between them and the region shows several common characteristics that point out understudied and overlooked aspects. First, that is the point of view of China or Russia. Most of the literature discusses how one of the two countries projects power over the region and how it clashes with the position of the second one. However, the perspective of CA—how the region views or interacts—is mostly not considered. Moreover, the region is generally treated and analysed as a whole. There are few case studies of specific CA countries within Chinese and Russian influence, but they are rather exceptions, and they are usually specifically focused (e.g., security sphere). There is indeed a lack of case studies of single CA countries. In terms of methodology, most of the literature applies a realist approach. Constructivism is not used, which is related to the fact that the perspective of CA is not studied. There is also a lack of scholarly studies published after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that focus on its possible impact. That is a problem, as it is a significant geopolitical event involving Russia and another post-Soviet country, and media and think-tanks have been analysing the implications for CA.

This thesis contributes to the academic literature by filling this gap. It does not concern the point of view of China and Russia, but it analyses perceptions of CA based on a case study of one CA state, Kazakhstan, which is the largest and strongest one and the “unofficial leader of the region” (Wang and Zhuravleva, 2015). Furthermore, the constructivist theoretical approach is applied, and the focus is on the period before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

2. Chinese and Russian Influence in Central Asia and Kazakhstan

To analyse Kazakhstan's perception of China and Russia, it is necessary to provide theoretical background on the situation of relations within the region. This is the first of two parts addressing the theoretical background. Here, the focus is on Chinese and Russian influence in CA, relations between the region and the two powers, and mutual relations between China and Russia in CA, as this is an essential context for the Kazakh case and has received great attention in academic literature, think tank reports, and the news media recently.

2.1 Russia and Central Asia

The countries of today's CA were mostly controlled by the Russian Empire by the end of the 19th century and became part of the USSR after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 as Soviet Central Asia. In the 1920s, the Soviet republics were formed with borders they have kept until today. With the dissolution of the USSR, they became independent countries (Kazakhstan was the last republic to secede from the USSR). However, given the long history of belonging to Russian states, all CA countries have a mixed ethnic composition consisting of notable Russian minorities, a legacy of Russian language, and overall a complex and unequal relationship with their former "colonisers" (Pizzolo and Carteny, 2022).

Since the independence of the CA countries, Russia has sought to maintain its dominance in the region. Russian influence has been strong due to the shared Soviet history, cultural affinities, economic interdependency, Russian-oriented elites, and media influence that Russia uses to promote the idea that CA belongs to the same civilisation (Pizzolo and Carteny, 2022). Further, from a Russian perspective, the dominance in the neighbouring regions is crucial for national security (Berls, 2021). While CA remains within Russia's sphere of significant influence, its power in the region is incomparably weaker than during the Soviet era, but Russia has been diligently striving to improve the situation, and its stance has developed over time. According to Oliphant (2013), Russia's approach towards CA can be divided into three phases: in the first phase, in the first half of the 1990s, Russia had no clear policy towards CA and lacked interest and focus. The second phase in the second half of the 1990s is characterised by Russia's aim to regain its

leading influential position in CA and the third phase begins with President Vladimir Putin coming to power in 2000. This last phase means greater involvement in the region, especially in the security area (after 9/11), but also in the economy and trade.

The relations between CA countries and Russia are evident in various aspects, such as economic ties, high-level political connections, security ties, and cultural relations, both bilaterally and within multilateral frameworks. Bilateral engagement, particularly in security and trade, is predominant. However, due to geographical proximity, Soviet-era infrastructure, and interconnectedness in areas like language, economy, politics, and culture, Moscow also views the region as a collective entity (Oliphant, 2013).

Russia utilises several regional intergovernmental organisations to facilitate multilateral cooperation with CA countries. Following the breakup of the USSR, the *Commonwealth of Independent States* (hereinafter CIS) was established, encompassing most of the post-Soviet countries. Many CIS member states (including Kazakhstan) participate in the CIS Free Trade Area. Another organisation, the *Collective Security Treaty Organisation* (hereinafter CSTO), formed in 2002, serves as a military alliance comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and other post-Soviet countries. CSTO is a security and defence organisation ensuring collective response to an attack on a member state¹, sometimes referred to as the “Russian NATO” (Gardáš, 2023). In 2015, Russia initiated the EAEU, a platform with the goal of economic integration, modernization, and market expansion. Similar to European integration, it involves supranational institutions, common rules, and the internal market. However, among CA states, only Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan participate. It is evident that the multilateral approach has its limitations, as existing platforms either exclude certain CA countries or may not be optimally designed for Russia-CA cooperation (Makocki and Popescu, 2016).

For a long time, Russia served as the primary trading partner for CA countries and played a crucial role in the energy sector. However, the dynamic shifted, and it has been surpassed by China (Oliphant, 2013; China-Central Asia Monitor, 2023). Despite that, Russia is still important in trade and economic cooperation, and mutual trade continues to

¹ Although CSTO does not seem to be fully capable of fulfilling the collective response commitment. Russia refused to help CSTO member state Armenia during the Azerbaijan’s takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 even though Armenian prime minister asked Moscow for help (Stradner, 2023).

increase (Umarov, 2022b; Makocki and Popescu, 2016). The key area of economic cooperation between Russia and CA is energy. It is especially the case with Kazakhstan, as Russian companies (Lukoil and Rosneft) are active in oil and gas projects and joint ventures in Kazakhstan and help import and redistribute Kazakh energy deposits. In Uzbekistan, Gazprom and Lukoil also participate in natural gas production and purchase. And, to a lesser extent, Russian energy companies invest in the remaining CA countries. In terms of trade, the main CA exports to Russia include raw minerals, metals, and agricultural products. The main products exported from Russia are manufactured goods, such as machinery, technology products, and textiles. Crucial role in economic relations also plays a large number of CA migrant workers in Russia (Oliphant, 2013).

Since the 1990s, Russia has maintained strong security relations with countries in CA and played a pivotal role in resolving security issues in the region. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are CSTO members and thus enjoy Russia's security guarantee. Russia participated in the protection of CA countries' borders and counterterrorism efforts in the 1990s and 2000s. The country conducts joint military exercises with its CA counterparts, often within the CSTO, on a regular basis (e.g., *Rubezh*, with the aim of protecting Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan) and military operations (e.g., *Operation Channel* with the aim of fighting drug trafficking from Afghanistan), and it has its military bases in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. There are also rapid response forces within the CSTO to help protect CA countries in the event of an emergency (Kazantsev, Medvedeva, and Safranchuk, 2021). Recently, CSTO forces under Russian leadership have proven their readiness when they were promptly deployed to help Kazakhstan's government counter mass protests during the 2022 Kazakh unrest in January 2022 (Auyezov, 2022).

2.2 China and Central Asia

Chinese relations with CA and its influence there have received greater attention since the 2000s, especially in recent years. However, China had strong interest in the region already after the dissolution of the USSR, which signalled the end of the Soviet threat, but the newly established CA countries meant a novel security situation on the western border. The breakup of the Soviet bloc coincided with the democratic movement

in China, which ended in the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, and with pro-independence and anti-Chinese movements in Xinjiang, Uyghur Autonomous Region bordering CA. The Chinese government has adopted repressive policies in Xinjiang since the 1980s and is aimed at maintaining a stable border with CA to prevent external support for independence movements. Beijing's main objective in the 1990s was thus political stability in the area (Niquet, 2006; Serikkaliyeva, 2019).

Beyond stability concerns, China wanted to use the dissolution of the USSR to expand its influence in diplomatic terms in CA. In the 1990s, China was largely isolated (diplomatically and economically), especially from the West, after the Tiananmen Square massacre. Despite that, under the leadership of Jiang Zemin, China maintained a foreign policy of good relations with neighbouring countries and other countries and did not renounce the policy of economic reforms and opening up introduced by Deng Xiaoping at the end of the 1970s. In the 1990s, China sought to improve relations with the world and increase its foreign trade and economic cooperation to break its isolation. In the 2000s, Chinese foreign policy took a turn from keeping a low profile to increasing confidence and activity. In 2001, China entered the *World Trade Organisation* (hereinafter WTO), and in 2003, Hu Jintao came to power with his policy of *Chinese peaceful development* [*zhongguo heping fazhan* 中国和平发展].² Thereafter, China's economic and political position in the world has increased. In 2013, Xi Jinping assumed power, and with its already great economic strength, China has become notably more assertive.

Since the early 2000s, Chinese strategy towards CA has been shifting more and more towards economic cooperation, which includes infrastructure development (roads, rails, and air networks) and increasing trade. CA meant a new market for Chinese goods and a source of energy supplies, much needed in Beijing. Given the rapid economic growth after reforms in the 1970s and 1980s, China had to import energy to meet its domestic needs (crude oil since 1993 and gas since 2006), partly from CA. For example, the *China National Petroleum Corporation* (hereinafter CNPC) has been acquiring shares in Kazakh

² Originally *Chinese peaceful rise* [*zhongguo heping jueqi* 中国和平崛起]. The name was changed because of the concerns that "rise" can be perceived as aggressive.

energy companies since 1994, and in 2004, a free trade zone was opened in Khorgos at the border with Kazakhstan (Niquet, 2006). China has also constructed oil and gas pipelines that connect CA countries and China, such as China-Kazakhstan oil pipelines, China-Kazakhstan gas pipelines, and China-CA gas pipelines (with more subsections). The major Chinese energy partners in CA are Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan (Serikkaliyeva, 2019). However, CA countries are not the main energy suppliers to China; for example in 2021, most of the crude oil was exported to China from Saudi Arabia, Russia, Iraq, Oman, and Angola (OECa, n.d.).

Trade between China and CA has been growing significantly since the early 2000s (Niquet, 2006; Khitakhunov, n.d.). In September 2013 in Astana, Kazakhstan, Chinese President Xi Jinping presented the strategy of the *Silk Road Economic Belt*, which, together with the *21st Century Maritime Silk Road*, announced a month later in Jakarta, Indonesia, is part of BRI. BRI represents a large-scale infrastructure and economic development strategy devised by the Chinese government, aimed at fostering economic cooperation and interconnectedness with countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa. Key aspects of the project are infrastructure building (roads, railways, energy networks, ports, etc.), increasing and facilitating economic exchanges, trade, and investments. CA, being at the centre of the historic Silk Road connecting China and Europe, plays a significant role in BRI because of its strategic location, as China is trying to expand its economic connections to Europe. CA thus holds a central position in the focus of BRI (Makocki and Popescu, 2016; Cai, 2017; Serikkaliyeva, 2019). However, Chinese trade with CA countries itself has been increasing steadily, and China bypassed Russia, the region's traditional major partner, in terms of mutual trade. First, in the trade volume with CA as a whole and since 2023 also with each CA country bilaterally (Oliphant, 2013; China-Central Asia Monitor, 2023; Energy Prom, 2023).

China plays a pivotal role as a trade and investment partner for CA, as bilateral trade has witnessed substantial growth in recent years. Between 2015 and 2019, there was a 35% increase in the export of goods from CA to China, with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan registering an increase of over 50%. During the same period, Chinese exports to CA grew by 49% (Uzbekistan by 126%, while Tajikistan and Turkmenistan decreased). In the first half of 2023, the trade volume between China and all CA countries surged significantly as well, compared to the same period the previous year (Ozat, 2023). However, there is a

strong imbalance in mutual economic importance as China is the most important trading partner for CA countries, but for China, trade with CA is relatively insignificant and accounts for only about 1% of Chinese imports and exports (China Briefing Team, 2021). Furthermore, it is difficult for CA countries to export to the Chinese market, which remains closed for them, as China pursues a protectionist trade policy towards CA (Khitakhunov, n.d.). Nevertheless, China invests a lot in the region, especially in infrastructure, the energy sector, and recently also in energy renewables. It offers more substantial funds and benefits than any other CA partner. The trend of growing Chinese economic interest in CA was confirmed at the China-CA summit in Xi'an in May 2023, which brought more Chinese investments (Ozat, 2023).

Recent reports indicate an escalated Chinese presence in the security domain in CA. China has been paying attention to the potential security threats in the region, particularly concerning terrorism stemming from Uyghur Islamic movements, exemplified by incidents like the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in 2016. This threat has been magnified since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and the takeover by the Taliban, following the greater presence of terrorist groups in a country bordering CA (and China). To protect its interests, China has been building military bases in Tajikistan (Hladíková, 2022). As demonstrated by the case study of Kyrgyzstan (Muratalieva, Esenbekova, and Tatkalo, 2022), China seeks to establish its presence in the security area through non-institutionalised interactions and in a low-profile manner (by developing personal relations with security officials and training them in China). Such an approach aims to avoid provoking Russia, which holds dominance in the security sphere in CA.

2.3 Relations between Russia and China in Central Asia

Based on the traditional Russian dominance in security and military affairs and the Chinese increased presence in the economic sphere, the relationship between China and Russia in CA has been labelled as a “division of labour” (Paszak 2020; Kazantsev, Medvedeva, and Safranchuk, 2021; Pizzolo and Carteny, 2022). Until recently, there has been a common understanding that China and Russia tend to pragmatically cooperate in the region and avoid confrontation of their interests, or at least they try to (Cooley, 2015; Hofstee and Broeders, 2020). Collaboration frequently occurs in multilateral contexts, with

a notable example being the *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation* (hereinafter SCO). SCO is a regional security organisation initiated by China and established in 2001, following up on the *Shanghai Five Mechanism* from 1996. Four out of five CA countries are SCO member states, as Turkmenistan declares itself to be a permanently neutral country and refuses to participate. The primary goal of the SCO is to address security concerns (fighting the “three evil forces”: international terrorism, ethnic separatism, and religious extremism) and facilitate coordinated actions within its framework (Serikkaliyeva, 2019). Beyond that, China and Russia cooperate within BRI and EAEU and try to coordinate their economic initiatives for CA (Kazantsev, Medvedeva, and Safranchuk, 2021). Chinese and Russian presidents concluded two agreements connecting BRI and EAEU: the *Joint Statement on Cooperation on the Construction of Joint Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Projects* [*zhonghua renmin gongheguo yu eluosi lianbang guanyu sichou zhilu jingjidai jianshe he ouya jingji lianmeng jianshe duijie hezuo de lianhe shengming* 中华人民共和国与俄罗斯联邦关于丝绸之路经济带建设和欧亚经济联盟建设对接合作的联合声明] and the *China-EAEU Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation* [*zhonghua renmin gongheguo yu ouya jingji lianmeng jingmao hezuo xieding* 中华人民共和国与欧亚经济联盟经贸合作协定] in 2018 (MFA PRC, 2015; GOV PRC, 2018).

On the other hand, with the significant growth of the Chinese economy in the past decades, the Chinese presence in CA has been steadily growing, along with the expanse of Russian traditional dominance. As mentioned above, China surpassed Russia to become the primary trading partner and main investor for all CA countries. Together with economic power, the position in political and security areas increases as well. Many observers have already noted this trend and predicted it would only continue (Mirza and Ayub, 2021; Makocki and Popescu, 2016; Egorycheva, 2019).

Significant developments came with the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Since then, Russia has started to focus most of its military and security efforts on Ukraine, and more importantly, the invasion has had an impact on the Russian economy. Western countries imposed economic sanctions against Russia (including bans on the import of Russian fossil fuels, sanctions against Russian banks, freezes of Russian assets, bans on exports to Russia, etc.), which made it much more dependent on China in terms of foreign trade and other spheres of economic cooperation (e.g., banking).

The Chinese position towards the invasion is much more moderate. At the beginning of February 2022, a few weeks before the invasion, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin met and issued a joint statement declaring partnership with “no limits” (не имеет границ) (Kremlin, 2022). Since the invasion, China has maintained its approach of not criticising Russia but also not openly supporting it. Diplomatically, China proclaims to stay neutral and did not condemn the invasion in *United Nations* voting. It also criticised the West for provoking Russia. For China, the situation is favourable, as it exhausts both Western countries and Russia. China shares the resistance to a Western-led world order with Russia. However, the two are not natural partners; they have many mutual disputes, and their cooperation only stems from the common goal of opposition towards the West (McCarthy, 2023).

Since the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian position in CA has markedly declined, and there are three aspects to it. First, Moscow does not have the capacity to uphold its dominance anymore. Second, China is using its position as the stronger power and is filling in where Russia is falling out. Similarly, the US is trying to use the situation to promote its influence in CA. Third, CA countries no longer consistently view Russia as their primary security guarantor, and they appear to have a tendency to distance themselves somewhat from Russia (Imamova, 2023; O’Donnell, 2023).

3 Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy

After discussing CA in general, this part shifts attention to Kazakhstan specifically. It introduces the country's foreign policy and describes the development of relations with China and Russia. Kazakhstan's official policy narrative regarding China and Russia falls within the country's foreign policy. It is important to introduce and briefly describe the foreign policy of Kazakhstan in order to analyse the narrative. While Kazakhstan's foreign policy shares some similarities with other CA countries, it should not be regarded as a part of broader CA foreign policy. Approaches to foreign policies differ among CA countries, and they cannot be considered as one entity. In this light, Kazakhstan possesses a unique foreign policy.

Since gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan has followed multi-vector foreign policy, which is defined as developing "foreign relations through a framework based on a pragmatic, non-ideological foundation," and Kazakhstan's former President Nursultan Nazarbayev labelled it as "the development of friendly and predictable relations with all states that play a significant role in world affairs and are of practical interest to the country" (Vanderhill, Joireman, and Tulepbayeva, 2020). The goal of this policy is to diversify foreign relations and avoid over-reliance on one country or geopolitical block. It effectively enables a less powerful state to balance its asymmetrical relations with competing great powers, aiming to secure benefits and favourable terms from all of them (Vanderhill, Joireman, and Tulepbayeva, 2020).

In the case of Kazakhstan, multi-vector foreign policy has played a role in asserting its own national identity and preserving sovereignty. Kazakhstan has profound historical, cultural, and linguistic ties with Russia, and it is an important partner. The two countries have strong security relations; Russia used to be the main trade partner and still remains a significant one, and it occupies the largest share of Kazakhstan's border. Kazakhstan therefore develops good relations with Russia and cooperates effectively in many areas. At the same time, Kazakhstan is careful not to allow Russia to restore its "sphere of privileged interests" in the country (Oliphant, 2013). Kazakhstan has been especially resolute in the case of its independence and sovereignty. Kazakhstan promotes (domestically and internationally) the Kazakh identity as originating in the historical Turkic khaganate and being distinct from the Russian civilisation, in contrast to the Russian claim that

Kazakhstan was created by the USSR through the Kazakh Socialist Republic. In 2014, Russian President Putin stated that “Kazakhs never had any statehood” (Najibullah, 2014), to which Kazakh President Nazarbayev reacted by threatening to leave the Russian-led EAEU. Kazakhstan has stepped up its opposing stance against Russia, especially since the annexation of Crimea in 2014; e.g., Kazakhstan rejected Russia’s plan of monetary union within the EAEU (Vanderhill, Joireman, and Tulepbayeva, 2020). Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Kazakhstan has stayed neutral in the war and refused to support Moscow in any way (Konarzewska, 2023).

Kazakhstan used its increasing economic relations with China, another great power at the border, to balance and reduce its economic dependence on Russia. China has become a major (especially economic) partner for Kazakhstan. As Kazakhstan declined to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there were cases of hostile rhetoric from Moscow, questioning Kazakh sovereignty. As a reaction, China defended Kazakhstan and stressed support for its sovereignty and independence (Konarzewska, 2023).

Meanwhile, Kazakhstan pushes back against China in order to limit its dependence on this country as well. Balancing relations with the bordering great powers, China and Russia, is an essential element of Kazakhstan’s multi-vector foreign policy, as they might present an imminent threat. However, Kazakhstan engages notably also with the US and the *European Union* (hereinafter EU). While geographically distant, the US and the EU are noteworthy partners for Kazakhstan, receiving considerable attention in the country's foreign policy. The EU is Kazakhstan’s largest trading partner and foreign investor (European Commission, n. d.), and the US plays a significant role in investments in the oil and gas sector. At the same time, Kazakhstan has managed to avoid implementing reforms pushed by the EU and US (Vanderhill, Joireman, and Tulepbayeva, 2020).

The approach of a multi-vector foreign policy involves participating with great powers and other countries in diverse multilateral settings. Kazakhstan has integrated with China, Russia, the EU, and the US into regional and international organizations. The objective of engaging in multilateral diplomacy is to avert conflicts and prevent the dominance of the region by a single power. A crucial regional organisation is SCO, of which Kazakhstan, along with China and Russia, is one of the founding members. Kazakhstan has been an active participant in the SCO, aspiring to assume a leadership role.

The organisation is important for Kazakhstan, as in the case of any crisis in CA, Kazakhstan could have a voice through the SCO and might prevent China and Russia from acting unilaterally. Kazakhstan has also played an active role within the CSTO, a collective defence organisation that Russia uses to legitimise its military presence in CA. Further, Kazakhstan is a member state of the *Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe* (hereinafter OSCE), through which it has strengthened relations with Europe and the West. It was the first post-Soviet and CA country to chair the organisation (Vanderhill, Joireman, and Tulepbayeva, 2020).

Kazakhstan's foreign policy diverges from that of other CA countries. Kazakhstan is unique in its emphasis on a multi-vector approach, building good relations with all great powers and thus avoiding over-reliance on one country and preventing conflicts. This approach contrasts with the other CA states, especially Turkmenistan, which claims to be a strictly neutral country and has not joined any regional organizations. Uzbekistan left the CSTO in 2012, and besides Kazakhstan, only Kyrgyzstan is a member of the EAEU (Vanderhill, Joireman, and Tulepbayeva, 2020).

3.1 Kazakhstan's Relations with Russia

Since the dissolution of the USSR, Kazakhstan and Russia have maintained a constructive relationship. However, there has been a development from rather positive ties in the beginnings to becoming more intricate over time. Especially the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led to a slight deterioration. Nevertheless, Russia holds substantial economic importance for Kazakhstan, serving as the country's primary import partner and playing a particularly crucial role in the energy sector. Thus, economic relations remain firm (Mikovic, 2023; Konarzewska, 2023).

After its independence, Kazakhstan established a positive relationship with Russia. In 1991, both countries were founding members of the CIS, and Russia played a role in helping with Kazakhstan's early economic development. Together with other CA countries, Kazakhstan had strong ties with Russia from the Soviet era, including infrastructure, economic interdependency, connections of elites, and Russian security presence. Despite Kazakhstan's economic dependence on Russia since the beginning, bilateral economic activities between the two countries were rather weak in the first decade

after the dissolution of the USSR. Russian investments in Kazakhstan only started to increase after 2000, as the Russian economy grew and a lot of regional integration organisations were established (CSI, SCO, etc.). Since 2005, Kazakhstan has also started to invest in Russia more notably (Zabortseva, 2014).

Significant connections between Russia and Kazakhstan exist in the energy sector, with Russia directing its efforts and activities more towards Kazakhstan than other CA countries. Kazakhstan, a country abundant in oil reserves, exports large quantities of oil to (and through) Russia, primarily via the *Caspian Pipeline Consortium*, in which Russia has a 31% stake (Umarov, 2022a). Furthermore, many Russian energy companies invest in and participate in projects in Kazakhstan, such as Lukoil, Gazprom, or Rosneft (Oliphant, 2013).

In terms of mutual trade, Kazakhstan has remained closer to Russia compared to other CA nations, and it was the last CA country to see China pass Russia in the annual trade turnover in 2023 (China-Central Asia Monitor, 2023). For example, in 2018, Kazakhstan's trade with Russia significantly exceeded its trade with China, as other CA countries (except Tajikistan) already traded more with China (Egorycheva, 2019). Over the years, trade between Kazakhstan and Russia has been steadily increasing, with Russian exports to Kazakhstan dominating the trade flow, while the reverse direction constitutes a much smaller portion. In 2021, Russia exported 18.1 billion US dollars, mainly comprising cars, refined petroleum, and coke. Kazakhstan's exports for the same period amounted to only 5.99 billion US dollars (OEC, n.d.b.).

Kazakhstan enjoys security and military ties with Russia, which are also exercised through the CSTO. The latest Russian security engagement in Kazakhstan could be seen in January 2022, when CSTO units were deployed to Kazakhstan under Moscow's leadership to help the local government counter mass violent protests (Auyezov, 2022). However, some scholars claim it was only a "symbolic mission," as the CSTO soldiers did not actually engage in suppressing protesters, and the intervention served mostly to show the power of Kazakhstan's leadership (Libman and Davidzon, 2023). Furthermore, Kazakhstan's security cooperation with Russia does not reach the same level as that of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (Oliphant, 2013).

The connection between the two countries is further expressed by the significant Russian ethnic minority living in Kazakhstan (17.9% of Kazakhstan's population in 2022) and the role of the Russian language as a lingua franca. Both factors are part of the heritage of Soviet history, and both have been slowly changing. The proportion of the Russian population is decreasing (due to emigration to Russia), and Kazakhstan's government has been trying to promote the Kazakh language. There is also a plan to change the Cyrillic writing system of the Kazakh language (taken from Russian) to the Latin system by 2031 (Peyrouse, 2007; Satubaldina, 2021; The World Factbook, 2024).

Kazakh-Russian relations have always appeared to be on a good note, at least on the official level. But there have been several moments showing that it is not always positive, as shows Putin's statement that "Kazakhs never had any statehood" (Vanderhill, Joireman, and Tulepbayeva, 2020). Generally, Kazakhstan's stance towards Russia has worsened since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and then even more since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Konarzewska, 2023). Kazakhstan has been trying for a long time to decrease its dependence on Russia and strengthen relations with other countries. At the same time, it is still strongly reliant on Moscow in terms of energy exports and imports of goods. Russia might also pose a security threat if Kazakhstan acts hostile towards it, which is also a lesson from Ukraine.

However, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moscow's position has weakened, as it needs Kazakhstan more because of Western sanctions, and the military threat is lower when Russia is currently occupied in Ukraine. Consequently, Kazakhstan has indeed increased its attempts to diversify its relations away from Russia. In 2022, President Tokayev visited Turkey and agreed to exchange military intelligence with Turkey, a *North Atlantic Treaty Organisation* (hereinafter NATO) member. In the same year, he visited Azerbaijan and congratulated President Ilham Aliyev on "restoring the territorial integrity" by fighting with Kazakhstan's CSTO ally Armenia (Umarov, 2022a). The two countries also agreed to increase economic cooperation, as Azerbaijan might help diversify Kazakhstan's energy exports. Regarding the Russian war in Ukraine, Kazakhstan has not supported Russia in any way and does not recognise the self-proclaimed republics in Ukraine's Donbas region. Kazakhstan also stated it would not help Russia evade Western sanctions (Umarov, 2022a). As a reaction, some Russian politicians threatened Kazakhstan to adopt the same faith as Ukraine (Lillis, 2022a).

3.2 Kazakhstan's Relations with China

Kazakhstan and China have strong relations in many spheres. Given its proximity, Kazakhstan plays a crucial role in ensuring regional security for China, especially concerning threats from Uyghur movements, which Beijing sees as a threat. With Kazakhstan being rich in oil reserves, the two countries have cooperated significantly in the energy sector. They have developed good trade relations, and China has been investing in infrastructure in Kazakhstan within the BRI.

Relations between Kazakhstan and China have been developing since the very beginning of Kazakhstan's existence. They started by resolving border disputes inherited from the USSR, and Beijing sought to avoid Kazakhstan becoming a safe base for Uyghur movements by developing good political relations with Astana. The Uyghurs (Turkic ethnicity, same as Kazakhs) inhabit Xinjiang Autonomous Region, which borders Kazakhstan, and, in the past, they have stood up to Chinese rule (including by terrorist means). Therefore, the Chinese government has seen them as a threat and suppressed them. Most of the border issues were settled in 1994 and completed by 1998. The two countries also committed to fighting against separatism, terrorism, and regional extremism together (Kembayev, 2020).

In the beginning, Kazakhstan started to import goods from China to compensate for shortages caused by the collapse of the USSR and disruption of trade flow. In 1994, Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng visited Almaty and called on Kazakhstan to increase mutual trade, improve transport corridors, and thus create the *New Silk Road*. Trade relations began to grow as Kazakhstan sought to diversify its economic dependence on Russia. Later in the 1990s, China started to be more present in the energy sector when CNPC gained a 60% stake in Kazakhstan's *AktobeMunaiGas* company in 1997. In 2005, CNPC and *KazMunaiGaz* completed the China-Kazakhstan oil pipeline, the first oil pipeline connecting CA and China. Economic relations have developed further in the 2000s as China explored ways to use Kazakhstan as a connection to Europe within its *New Silk Road* project (Kembayev, 2020).

The introduction of BRI in 2013 placed Kazakhstan at the heart of Chinese plans to develop transportation infrastructure in Europe and boost trade with countries involved in BRI. During Xi's visit, the two countries signed large investment deals, and China increased its share in the Kazakh oil industry. Plans for new projects to build transport corridors were adopted, and Kazakhstan has turned into the "logistical heart of Eurasia" (Kembayev, 2020). Over the next few years, economic relations have been growing (China-Central Asia Monitor, 2023).

Kazakhstan and China have also maintained strong political relations. Already in the 1990s, they resolved the border issues and agreed to fight against terrorism. In 2005, they declared that their relationship had reached a *strategic partnership* (Kembayev, 2020). Kazakhstan and China share similar values, as they are both dictatorships and dislike Western promotion of democracy. Kazakhstan appreciates the Chinese practice of non-interference in domestic affairs, and according to some scholars, it might admire the Chinese model of economic success with tight political control (Melet, 1998; Kembayev, 2020).

Kazakhstan and China are also both founding members of SCO, where they cooperate mainly in the security area. That includes counterterrorism efforts, joint military exercises, and other forms of collaboration. Beyond that, SCO facilitates economic cooperation and trade. However, Kazakhstan and China do not cooperate within more significant regional international organisations (compared to Russia) (Serikkaliyeva, 2019).

4. Theoretical Framework: Social Constructivism

When analysing Kazakhstan's perception of Chinese and Russian influence, the thesis adopts a theoretical framework based on the constructivist approach developed by Alexander Wendt. Social constructivism emerged as a third major theory in international relations after realism and liberalism, and it emphasises the role of ideas in shaping a state's behaviour. As the name social constructivism itself suggests, the world is socially constructed. Identities, social norms, and shared meanings play a significant role in international relations.

Wendt, the main representative of social constructivism, presents a moderate lane within constructivist scholarship. Contrary to traditional (mainly neorealist and neoliberal) materialism, Wendt's constructivism is idealistic in ontology. His concept of *anarchy is what states make of it*, which challenges the classical conception of an international system of *self-help anarchy*, where countries act based on their profit calculations stemming from material factors. Rather, states are more (but not only) influenced by ideational factors in their dealings with other states (Wendt, 1999).

4.1 Perception

Ideational factors, such as social norms and shared ideas, constitute the state's perception of others within the international system. Perception then influences how the state behaves and influences its policy choices and interactions. If states view each other as threats, the chance of a conflict increases, but if they perceive each other as partners, they are more likely to cooperate. According to Wendt, "people act towards objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them. States act differently toward enemies than they do toward friends because enemies are threatening, and friends are not" (Wendt, 1992, p. 396-397). Furthermore, the primary aspects of perception influence the content of actual foreign policy interactions. At the same time, interactions between states influence perception.

The state's perception constitutes how the state behaves, but simultaneously, the behaviour and other ideational factors (social norms, shared ideas, etc.) constitute the perception. Wendt (1999) admits that material forces also matter in shaping a state's behaviour, but they are not the sole determinant. The international system is not static, and decisions are not carried out only based on material factors. Rather, it is socially constructed through ideational elements, where perception holds a significant role. Perception and ideas are constantly changing and developing.

The reports published on the websites of the president and government of Kazakhstan concerning China and Russia, as analysed in the thesis, reflect the official perception regarding these countries. The way official representatives report about China and Russia shows how they are perceived on the level of the official political narrative. Which aspects of those countries are more reported, shows in which aspects are they primarily perceived. These reports are, however, influenced by the current developments in relations, e.g., reports about meetings between representatives of Kazakhstan and China or Russia. It is because perception is partly constituted by states' behaviour, and at the same time, perception, as reported in official statements, influences the future behaviour of the states.

4.2 Logic of Appropriateness

The understanding of perception and state behaviour is closely linked to the constructivist concept of *logic of appropriateness*, which posits that countries' behaviour is also guided by considerations of what is appropriate given the context. They do not only calculate costs and benefits in their policies and interactions—an approach called the *logic of consequences*.

These terms were developed by constructivist scholars James March and Johan Olsen (March and Olsen, 1998), but Wendt (1999) also discusses the idea. He claims that countries aim to conform to international norms. That is, in other words, to act in a way that is expected of them and deemed appropriate.

This logic is applied when viewing the official reports of the president and government of Kazakhstan. Expressions in the reports are trying to be appropriate for the context of such political documents. Kazakhstan follows a multi-vector foreign policy and tries to maintain favourable relations with all states. Therefore, the reports consider what is appropriate for Kazakh foreign policy presentation and conform to international norms.

4.3 Influence

In international relations, the term influence is associated with power, a concept that is defined in various ways. The commonly accepted definition comes from Robert Dahl, who stated that “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (Dahl, 1957, 202-203). In other words, to have power over a country is to be able to influence it. Wendt (1999) proposes that power is constituted by ideational factors more than material ones. Influence is therefore not an objective and static material phenomenon. It is constituted by ideas, including perception. How others perceive the power or influence of a state is more important than power solely based on material forces (e.g., military power).

The perception of China and Russia by Kazakh foreign policy elites reflects their understanding of Chinese and Russian power and influence. The publication of reports discussing these two countries signifies that Kazakh representatives acknowledge the influence. It is important to study in which areas Kazakhstan perceives the influence. Which spheres regarding China and Russia are discussed more (economy, security, etc.) suggest the areas of higher perceived influence.

4.4 Philosophical Foundations

To sum up, the analysis adopts idealistic ontology, as Kazakhstan’s perception is, according to Wendt, largely constituted by ideas. The *logic of appropriateness* suggests that the analysed statements and reports are influenced by shared ideas. Lastly, ideational factors also constitute the influence.

Given the idealistic ontology and qualitative approach in the analysis, I employ constructivist epistemology. The first reason for that is the focus on ideas as a significant part of the formative process of a state's behaviour and perception. The second reason is the adoption of qualitative content analysis as a research method. Constructivist epistemology maintains that social knowledge is constructed by various actors, is relative, and depends on context. Therefore, it aligns well with the conception of perception based on Alexander Wendt's approach. Furthermore, knowledge depends on the researcher's interpretation of the data (Drisko and Maschi, 2016).

5. Methodology: Qualitative Content Analysis

This thesis explores the perception of China and Russia and their influence as depicted in narratives by Kazakhstan's political elites, the president, and the government. It aims to find out how the narrative evolved over a period of one and a half years before and one and a half years after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. To analyse the perception, qualitative content analysis combined with a quantitative approach of the textual primary data published on official websites is conducted.

Qualitative content analysis presents a method used to systematically analyse data—it can include textual, audio-visual, and other types of data, but this thesis works only with textual—and divide it into categories according to common patterns. Generally, content analysis focuses on the content and meaning of the data. The reason for using qualitative content analysis is to address not only manifest content but also the core themes and ideas within texts. It requires the researcher's interpretation and paying attention to context and latent meaning, compared to basic content analysis, where word occurrences are only statistically measured. The goal of qualitative content analysis is to identify patterns or regularities in the data (Drisko and Maschi, 2016).

Qualitative content analysis aligns well with the thesis's goal to study the content of Kazakh official reports over a period before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The process of content analysis consists of coding—developing code categories responding to the main common themes. As the thesis explores which topics are present in the reports, which are prevailing, and whether there is a shift of focus among those topics over time, the adoption of content analysis presents a suitable option. Individual themes—code categories—are not always obvious within data because various words and ways are used to express them. Therefore, qualitative content analysis is applied rather than basic content analysis (which consists only of quantitative methods). E.g., nuances between perceptions of the Chinese economy and economic cooperation with China. Also, a lot of reports include more themes simultaneously, where the qualitative interpretation is essential to identify which receives significant emphasis and which is only briefly mentioned.

This thesis primarily employs qualitative content analysis to categorise the reports into specific code categories. However, there is also a quantitative component involved, particularly in quantifying the distribution of individual code categories and comparing the frequency of themes across different time periods and countries.

Research design can be defined as interpretative and comparative. An account of Kazakh reports and the themes they focus on is provided. At the same time, they are analysed before and after a specific event—i.e., compared—with the aim of finding out whether there has been a difference. The findings are presented in a narrative format to show how some cases were interpreted.

5.1 Data Collection

The thesis uses textual primary data in the form of official reports and statements published on the websites of the president of Kazakhstan (akorda.kz) and the government of Kazakhstan (gov.kz), which include all governmental ministries. Collected data consist of reports published between August 24, 2020, and August 24, 2023. This period spans over one and a half years before the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and one and a half years after. This date divides the data into two parts, which are compared.

The data are collected from four slots, each representing a different period and website in the case of perception of both China and Russia. The slots are *government website 2020-2022*, *government website 2022-2023*, *president website 2020-2022*, and *president website 2022-2023*. These four slots were used identically when searching for perceptions of China and Russia and their influence, therefore making it eight slots in total.

The data are retrieved using the Google search engine, employing specific key words, adjusting the search period, and specifying a search limit for results from akorda.kz and gov.kz websites. The websites have Kazakh, Russian, and English language versions; however, all reports are published only in Kazakh and Russian, and only some are in English. Therefore, the Russian version is used, and Russian key words are searched. Searching for perceptions of Russia includes the following words: *Россия* (Russia), *РФ*

(RF—Russian Federation), and *Москва* (Moscow). In search for perceptions of China, I use the equivalent key words: *Китай* (China), *КНР* (PRC, People’s Republic of China), and *Пекин* (Beijing).

The criteria for including a report or statement in the data set are that either the whole report is dedicated to China/Russia or Kazakh relations to the country, or at least a paragraph within a broader report is dedicated to China/Russia and discusses the country. A mere mention of a key word is not sufficient. Here are examples of included reports: *Briefing by the official representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, China is ready to intensify scientific and technological cooperation with Kazakhstan, A telephone conversation took place with Russian President Vladimir Putin.*

5.2 Data Analysis

In qualitative content analysis, the coding method is adopted. Coding is a systematic process to analyse data by organising them into different code categories according to their content, with the aim of discovering patterns and common themes in the data. Coding facilitates the interpretation of data. It allows us to go beyond quantitative counting and analyse qualitatively, but in a structured way.

There are two options for assigning codes to the data. First is deductive, when code categories are created in advance, and then they are assigned to data in the process of analysis. The second option is inductive, which means developing the code categories during the analysis. It is also possible to combine both approaches—create categories beforehand and then create new ones in the process as well—if it seems appropriate. This thesis adopts a combined approach in order to conduct the research.

The results of the analysis are presented in a narrative way. The description includes which code categories were assigned to which reports (examples are presented), and how they were coded. The identified patterns—how the typical and most frequently occurring reports look—are described. However, particular focus is given to the specific and non-typical reports that address China and Russia in a highly distinct way. Additionally, the results are quantified, and the development of perceptions of different

topics (code categories) is shown in numbers (and percentages) to better illustrate the results.

5.3 Acknowledgement of Limits

There are a few limitations in the data and methodology of this thesis that must be acknowledged. First, the perception of Kazakh officials is studied based only on officially published statements and reports. Such statements do not capture perception in its full range. There might be further aspects influencing the perception that are not publicly accessible (e.g., unofficial communication). Therefore, it is only possible to study the perception as presented in official discourse, not the actual perception.

Another limitation is inherent in the methodology process. As the author subjectively analyses and codes each piece of data, there is a possible risk of inconsistency and bias based on the author's subjective interpretations. Although, to avoid that and stay consistent, the author strictly follows set criteria and, throughout the analysis, constantly checks with previously coded data. But still, reliability problems might occur, meaning that the author may not categorise the data in the same way other researchers would. Often, in qualitative content analysis, more researchers participate to assure inter-coder reliability (Drisko and Maschi, 2016). However, that is not possible in this thesis.

6. Analysis

Analysis begins with presenting and defining code categories, followed by a layout of the collected reports. Subsequently, the results of the analysis—coding and its interpretation—are described. The coding part includes a quantitative presentation of the distribution of code categories and, after that, a qualitative comparison of reports before and after the Russian invasion and between perceptions of China and Russia. The interpretation of the results considers the theoretical background discussed in the first part of the thesis.

The aim of this analysis is to find out how China and Russia and their influence are perceived in the official narrative of Kazakhstan's president and government, in reports on their official websites, and how this narrative has evolved over a period of one and a half years before and one and a half years after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. To do so, the code categories that respond to the main common themes discussed in the reports and statements were inductively developed.

6.1 Code Categories

Two code categories were created deductively, before the analysis, based on secondary literature, and another five inductively, after a preliminary search through the data and during the analysis. The deductive two include *economic cooperation*, *security and military cooperation*.

During the work with data, several frequently occurring themes were identified, and the following code categories were established: *political and diplomatic cooperation*, *cultural cooperation*, *educational and scientific cooperation*, *cross-border cooperation*, and *environmental cooperation*. They were created for two reasons. First is high frequency—when the theme occurred more than once in each of the eight slots (from which data was collected). That is a case of *political and diplomatic cooperation*. The second reason is the appearance of a relevant and distinct theme, which in certain reports could not be replaced by or included in any other code category and totally occurred more than five times. This reason was applied to all inductive code categories.

The objective of this analysis is not limited to Kazakhstan's perception of its cooperation with China and Russia. Therefore, code categories addressing the same areas but not in the context of cooperation were developed. These categories are used when a report discusses China or Russia in a certain theme, but no relation or reference to Kazakhstan is mentioned. They include perception in the following spheres: *economic*, *security and military*, *political and diplomatic*, *cultural*, *educational*, and *environmental*. They are identical to the code categories of cooperation, with the exception of *the cross-border* category, as its nature is in relations with Kazakhstan (regarding the state border).³

Through work with data, the code categories were assigned at two levels: primary and secondary. Within a report, the primary code category represents the main aspect, which is discussed in greater detail compared to other addressed topics, receiving significantly more attention. There can be more primary code categories in one report if they are all its main focus and they are discussed to a similar extent. The secondary category is assigned to themes that are of notably lower importance, are described to a much lesser degree than the main category, or are only briefly mentioned.

Economic cooperation is the most frequent code category and the most relevant theme based on secondary literature. It is defined as discussing mutual economic ties, bilateral trade, cooperation in the energy sector, investments, business opportunities, signing trade and economic deals, and participation in economic forums. In the case of China, cooperation within BRI also falls under *economic cooperation*. To include a report in this category, it must document the discussion of these phenomena.

For example, a report titled *Kazakhstan boosts exports to China* [*Казахстан наращивает экспорт в Китай*] is assigned to *economic cooperation*:

QazTrade reports that the turnover of processed goods between Kazakhstan and China in January–March 2022 totaled \$3.1 billion, up 21.9% year-on-year (\$2.5 billion). [...] [По сообщению компании QazTrade, товарооборот обработанных товаров между Казахстаном и Китаем за январь-март 2022

³ However, non-cooperation code categories appeared to be absolute minority in the analysis (accounting to 2.02% of all used code categories).

года составил \$3,1млрд, что на 21,9% выше, чем за аналогичный период предыдущего года (\$2,5млрд).] (MTI RK, 2022).

Another example addressing the Kazakh president's visit to Russia states:

During his trip to Tatarstan, the President of Kazakhstan visited the city of republican significance, Naberezhnye Chelny. Here, the Head of State visited the largest automobile corporation in Russia, KAMAZ. [...] [В ходе поездки в Татарстан Президент Казахстана посетил город республиканского значения Набережные Челны. Здесь Глава государства побывал в крупнейшей автомобильной корпорации России «КАМАЗ».] The company, which exports cars to near and far abroad, considers the car market in Kazakhstan as an important direction. At the end of last year, KAMAZ's share of the new truck market in our country reached 42%. [...] [Компания, экспортирующая машины в ближнее и дальнее зарубежье, рассматривает авторынок Казахстана как важное направление. По итогам прошлого года доля «КАМАЗа» на рынке новых грузовиков в нашей стране достигла 42 %.] (Akorda, 2022b).

The second deductive code category is *security and military cooperation*, which was created following secondary literature where many authors discussed, especially Russian (but also Chinese) approaches to CA and Kazakhstan in the security or military realm. In this category, discussions of the cooperation of the armed forces, mutual military consultations, providing assistance in military training, discussing common military and security issues, and helping in cases of security threats by armed intervention or other means are included. Further, this category encompasses security cooperation in a wider sense. That is discussing the cooperation of the state's inner security, but also security in relation to natural disasters and protection during emergencies. However, in the analysis, *security and military cooperation* appears less frequently than one might expect based on secondary literature, as the category's frequency is lower or similar to many inductive code categories.

One example of *security and military cooperation* is the report on Russian help to Kazakhstan with the deployment of armed forces:

The President of Kazakhstan expressed gratitude to the Russian leader for his support in resolving the issue of sending a joint CSTO peacekeeping contingent to assist in restoring constitutional order and legality [...] [Президент Казахстана выразил признательность российскому лидеру за поддержку в решении вопроса о направлении объединенного миротворческого контингента ОДКБ для оказания содействия в восстановлении конституционного порядка и законности.] (Akorda, 2022a).

Another example concerns security cooperation in the sense of protection during emergencies:

[...] The purpose of this event is to organise effective cooperation in the border areas of the Atyrau and Astrakhan regions against emergency situations, as well as the mutual exchange of information about emergencies and the exchange of experience. [Целью данной мероприятий является организация эффективного сотрудничества в приграничных районах Атырауской и Астраханской областей от чрезвычайных ситуаций, а также взаимообменом информацией о ЧС, обменом опытом.] (EMER, 2022).

A code category for *political and diplomatic cooperation* was developed, as numerous reports delved into discussions regarding cooperation in these domains. Also, in many cases, the content was purely political or diplomatic, and no other category could be assigned. It is somewhat challenging to define *political and diplomatic cooperation* in the context of country-to-country relations, where the majority of reports could be described as a kind of political or diplomatic cooperation. Meetings of high politicians present a form of diplomacy (summit diplomacy), and negotiations in various areas (economics, security, etc.) pursue political goals. In short, when politicians (and diplomats) meet and discuss issues, it is politics and diplomacy. In this thesis, a more precise definition of this category is presented. The content of reports must include discussions of political or diplomatic affairs, or specifically diplomatic or political events. For example, discussing strategic partnerships, celebrating anniversaries of the establishment of diplomatic relations and

other political events, examining cooperation within international governmental organisations, etc.

At the same time, qualitative content analysis allows the author a certain degree of flexibility to analyse the theme of the code category in the context of the data piece. In some cases, a report about a meeting between two politicians is short and brief and lacks more information about what was discussed. In that case, a meeting between, e.g., the minister of foreign affairs and the ambassador can be labelled as *political and diplomatic cooperation*. However, such cases occur only minimally.

Political and diplomatic cooperation includes, for example, such reports as:

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev outlined Kazakhstan's principled approach to the further development of a comprehensive strategic partnership with the PRC on a long-term basis in the post-crisis period. [...] [Президент Касым-Жомарт Токаев изложил принципиальный подход Казахстана к дальнейшему развитию всестороннего стратегического партнерства с КНР на долгосрочной основе в посткризисный период.] (Akorda, 2021a).

Cultural cooperation appeared as another relevant code category present in most of the slots. Cooperation in cultural affairs is distinct and could not be included in any other category. It cannot be viewed as *economic cooperation*, as cultural exchange and events are often non-profit, economic profit is not its main motivation, and the economic aspect is not discussed. Although *cultural cooperation* could fall within *political and diplomatic cooperation*, as cultural diplomacy plays an important role in diplomacy, the political aspect is usually not addressed, and it does not fall within the narrower definition of *political and diplomatic cooperation* in this analysis. For data to be coded into this grouping, it must address cooperation between cultural institutions (museums, theatres, etc.), organising cultural events (exhibitions, literature readings, etc.), or the cooperation of cultural figures.

The following example of *cultural cooperation* explores the awarding of writers and literature translators:

At the Embassy of Kazakhstan, a solemn ceremony was held to present the Order of Dostyk, II degree, to professor and senior translator of the Association of Translators of China, Ha Huanzhang, as well as to the famous writer and head of the Main Directorate of the Publishing Group “Writers of China,” Akbar Mazhit. [...] [В Посольстве Казахстана состоялась торжественная церемония вручения орденов «Достык» II степени профессору, старшему переводчику Ассоциации переводчиков Китая Ха Хуаньчжану, а также известному писателю, руководителю Главного управления издательской группы «Писатели Китая» Акбару Мажиту.] (MFA RK, 2020).

In the code category *Educational and Scientific cooperation*, two related themes are combined. Education and science are close to each other, and they are both present in cooperation between universities, which appears frequently in the data as a distinct domain. Also, Kazakhstan’s government combines these two themes in the *Ministry of Science and Higher Education [Министерство науки и высшего образования Республики Казахстан]*, which is a source of several analysed reports. This category is distinct from others. As a (mostly) non-profit sphere, it is not related to economics and also does not fall directly within politics. Apart from universities, the code category further includes the cooperation of various research and educational institutions and the cooperation of researchers, scientists, and students.

Here is an example of the cooperation of universities in the *Educational and Scientific cooperation* code category:

South Kazakhstan University, named after Mukhtar Auezov, successfully completed negotiations with Xi'an University of International Studies, during which a memorandum of cooperation was signed. This document is aimed at strengthening international relations and establishing long-term partnerships. [...] [Южно-Казахстанский университет имени Мухтара Ауэзова успешно завершил переговоры с Сианьским университетом международных исследований, в ходе которых был подписан меморандум о сотрудничестве. Этот документ

направлен на укрепление международных отношений и налаживание долгосрочного партнерства.] (MES RK, 2023).

The code category *Cross-border cooperation* is rather difficult to define. It was established, because of numerous reports dealing with cooperation or resolving issues related to state borders (Kazakhstan shares significant parts of its borders with both China and Russia), which could not be assigned to any other code category. The category is defined as including discussions about practical issues related to the border or specifically mentioning cooperation in cross-border matters. They concern border checkpoints, the movement of goods or people across borders, the water allocation of transboundary rivers, and cross-border infrastructure.

The following example addresses cross-border river issues:

Vice-Minister Serik Kozhaniyazov and Akim of the West Kazakhstan region, Gali Iskaliev, held a meeting with the public of the West Kazakhstan region to discuss problematic issues in the Zhaiyk river basin. During the meeting, Kozhaniyazov S.S. noted that more than 80% of the flow comes from the territory of the Russian Federation. [Вице-министр Серик Кожаниязов и аким Западно-Казахстанской области Гали Искалиев провели встречу с общественностью Западно-Казахстанской области по обсуждению проблемных вопросов бассейна реки Жайык. В ходе встречи Кожаниязов С.С. отметил, что более 80% стока поступает с территории РФ.] (MENR RK, 2022).

The last code category, which appeared a few times as a distinct theme, is *environmental cooperation*. In some cases, it might be connected to economic or political cooperation; however, the connection is not ultimate, and *environmental cooperation* stands as an individual topic. To be labelled in this category, the data must delve into environmental issues concerning both countries (environmental protection, natural resources), or the cooperation of ecological and environmental institutions (the Ministry of Ecology, etc.). Also, in the case of several reports, *environmental cooperation* is assigned together with *cross-border cooperation* because cross-border issues may be connected to the environment, as in the previous example.

An example of environmental cooperation is:

Today in Moscow, a meeting was held between the Minister of Ecology, Geology, and Natural Resources of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Magzum Mirzagaliyev, and the Minister of Natural Resources and Ecology of the Russian Federation, Alexander Kozlov. During the meeting, a number of strategically important documents in the field of environmental protection and rational use of natural resources were signed [...] [Сегодня в Москве состоялась встреча Министра экологии, геологии и природных ресурсов Республики Казахстан Магзума Мирзагалиева с Министром природных ресурсов и экологии Российской Федерации Александром Козловым. В ходе встречи был подписан ряд стратегически важных документов в сфере охраны окружающей среды и рационального природопользования.] (MENR RK, 2020).

6.2 Reports

The data collection process involved the gathering of reports that contained relevant perceptions of China or Russia from the websites of the Kazakh president and government. This was conducted in two periods: from August 24, 2020 to February 24, 2022 (2020-22), and then from February 24, 2022 to August 24, 2023 (2022-23), resulting in a total of eight slots. Subsequently, an analysis was conducted to describe the perception of China and Russia in the Kazakh official narrative and to determine whether any developments occurred following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

218 reports were collected, 115 of which included perceptions of China and 103 of which included perceptions of Russia. Within the part dealing with China, 90 reports come from governmental websites. They are divided into two slots according to the date of publication: 25 reports from 2020–22 and 65 reports from 2022–23. Presidential websites have 25 reports with perceptions of China, 12 of them from 2020–22 and 13 from 2022–23. There are 63 reports from governmental websites addressing Russia—24 from 2020–22 and 39 from 2022–23—and 40 from presidential websites—22 from 2020–22 and 18 from 2022–23. As shown in *Table 1*.

China	Government websites 2020-22	25	90	115	218
	Government websites 2022-23	65			
	President websites 2020-22	12	25		
	President websites 2022-23	13			
Russia	Government websites 2020-22	24	63	103	
	Government websites 2022-23	39			
	President websites 2020-22	22	40		
	President websites 2022-23	18			

Table 1: Number of Reports within Slots.

The numbers of data discussing China and those discussing Russia are similar; however, China is addressed slightly more with 52.8% of reports. Within all the data, there is a majority of 153 (70.2%) government websites' reports compared to 65 (29.8%) of presidential websites' reports. In the data concerning China, governmental websites present 78.3%; in the case of Russia, the majority is 61.2%.

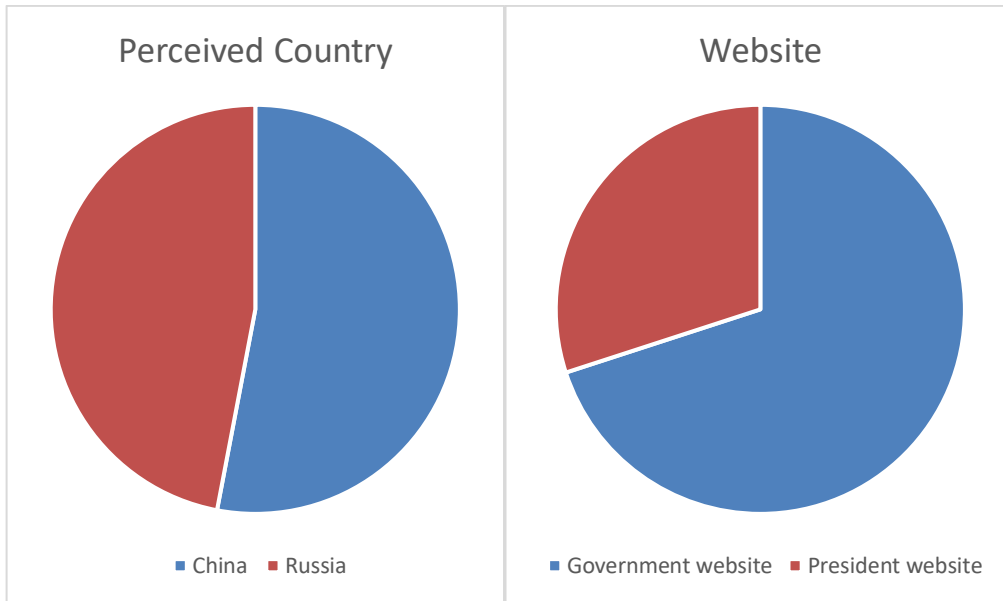


Figure 1: Distribution of Reports based on Perceived Country and Website.

When comparing data published in 2020–22 and 2022–23, we can observe an increase after the Russian invasion in 2022. Out of all the reports, only 83 (38.1%) were published in 2020–22 and the remaining 135 (61.9%) in 2022–23. In the case of perception of China, 37 out of 115 (32.2%) reports come from 2020–22 and 78 (67.8%) from 2022–23. In reports dealing with Russia, the difference is less significant, as 46 out of 103 (44.7%) were published in the first period and 57 (55.3%) after the invasion.

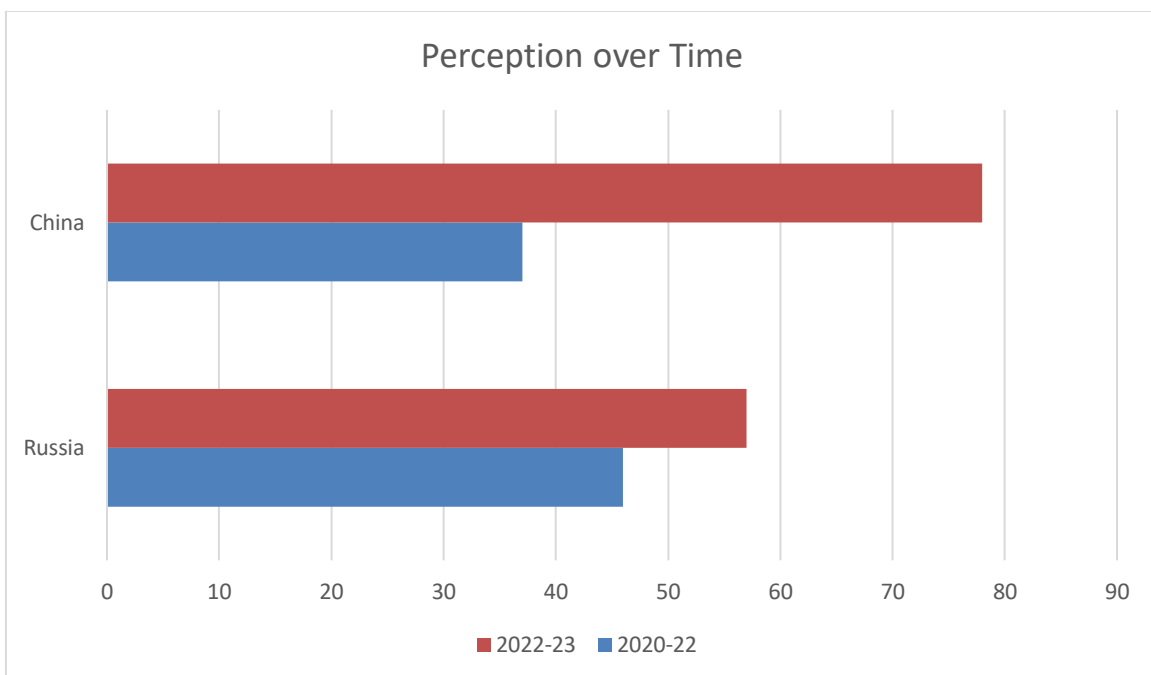


Figure 2: Distribution of Reports over Time within Perception of each Country.

When breaking down the development between 2020–22 and 2022–23, we find out that the increase in reports is true for 3 out of 4 slots. Beginning with China, governmental websites show the most notable difference, with 25 (27.8%) reports being published in 2020–22 and 65 (72.2%) in 2022–23. Within the presidential websites, the difference is insignificant: 12 (48%) in 2020–22 and 13 (52%) in the second term. In the case of Russia, governmental websites also show a division of 24 (38.1%) reports from 2020–22 and 39 (61.9%) from 2022–23. Presidential websites concerning Russia are the only example of a decrease over time. There is a majority of 22 (55%) reports from before the invasion and 18 (45%) from the second period.

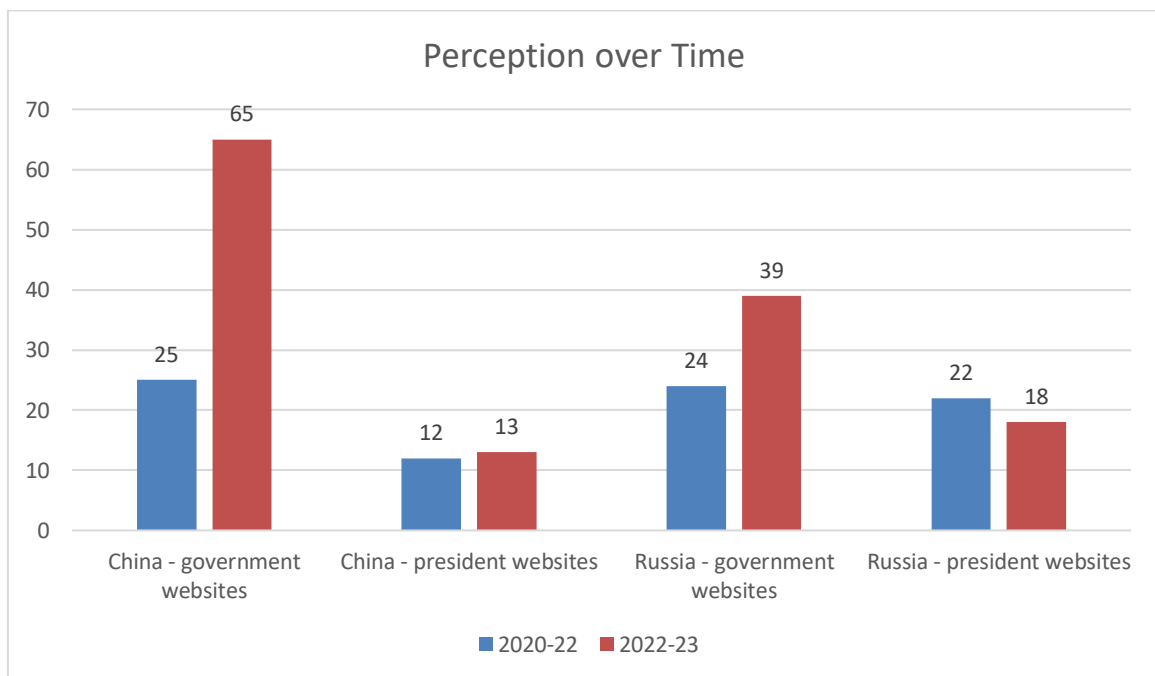


Figure 3: Distribution of Reports over Time in the Four Slots.

6.3 Coding

The collected reports underwent meticulous analysis and were categorised into specific code categories. These include deductive *economic cooperation, security and military cooperation*, inductively created *political and diplomatic cooperation, cultural cooperation, educational and scientific cooperation, cross-border cooperation, and environmental cooperation*. Some reports were also coded into non-cooperation code categories: *economic, security and military, political and diplomatic, cultural, educational,*

and *environmental*. Each report is assigned to one or more categories based on its primary content. If some topic was discussed to a significantly lesser extent, it is assigned a secondary code category.

Here, quantified coding results are presented alongside the distribution of individual code categories. The focus is on comparing the four primary slots (each country's perception during each period),⁴ highlighting typical reports within each slot, and giving heightened consideration to specific cases. That includes reports coded with non-cooperation categories and those that notably stand out from the rest. To answer the research question, a comparison is drawn between perceived themes over time (2020-22 vs. 2022-23) and with regard to both China and Russia.

In total, 397 code categories have been assigned. Including 274 main categories, 115 secondary categories, and 8 non-cooperation categories. Here, the categories are listed by frequency within the main category. By far the most frequent category is *economic cooperation*, which has been assigned in 112 cases as the main category and in 30 cases as the secondary category. *Political and diplomatic cooperation* is the second most significant code category, with 76 appearances as the main category and 9 as the secondary category. It is followed by *cross-border cooperation*, which was coded 26 times as the main and 14 times as the secondary category. *Security and military cooperation* has 18 main and 14 secondary categories. *Educational and scientific cooperation*: 17 main and 15 secondary category assignments. *Cultural cooperation* was assigned 16 main categories and 26 secondary categories. Finally, *environmental cooperation* is the least relevant category, with nine main category codes and seven secondary category codes.

For illustration, here is also a list of the categories in terms of the total number of main and secondary assignments together. However, the main categories have a higher corresponding value, as they reflect deeper discussion of the themes, while secondary categories are only complementary to include all the mentioned topics. In total assigned categories, the list is as follows: *economic cooperation* – 142 categories, *political and diplomatic cooperation* – 85 categories, *cultural cooperation* – 42 categories, *cross-border*

⁴ Further described in 6.3.2 *Comparison of Slots: Perception of China*.

cooperation – 40 categories, security and military cooperation, educational and scientific cooperation – both 32 categories, environmental cooperation – 16 categories.

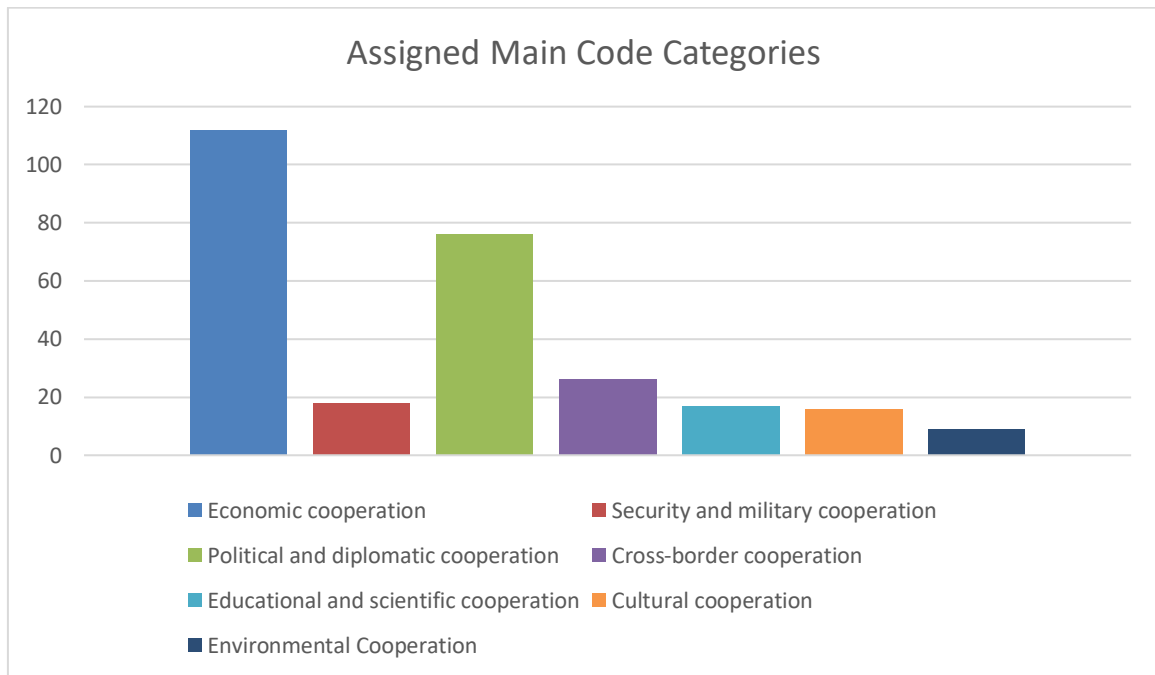


Figure 4: Distribution of Main Code Categories in All Data

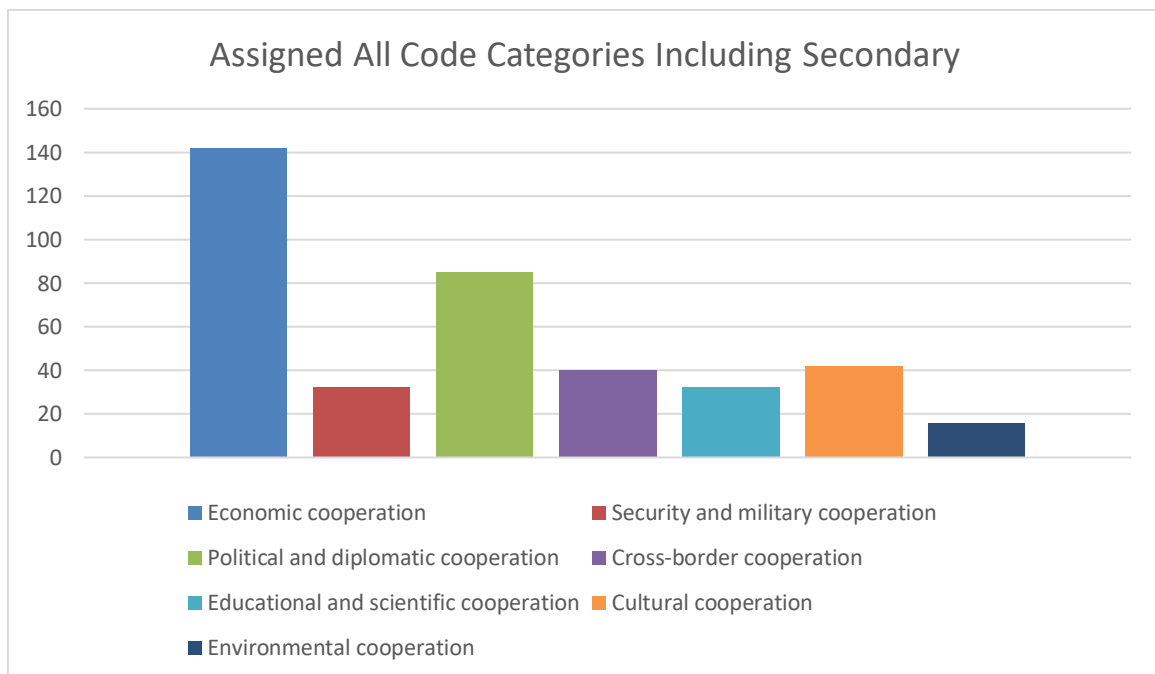


Figure 5: Distribution of All Code Categories Including Secondary in All Data

6.3.1 Code Category Distribution

Economic cooperation is overall the strongest category, which corresponds to its significant presence in secondary literature. However, the second deductive category of *security and military cooperation*, also created based on literature, appears to receive substantially less attention in Kazakh perception. The category ranks fourth (together with *educational and scientific cooperation*) out of eight in the main category frequency list.

Economic cooperation is highly relevant in regard to both China and Russia. Relations with China have primarily revolved around economic exchange since the 1990s, when Kazakhstan aimed to reduce its reliance on Russia. Later, Kazakhstan also became a focal point of the Chinese BRI, leading to increased Chinese investments, particularly in the energy sector. Russia has always been the key economic partner for Kazakhstan and has been dependent on it because of the strong ties from the Soviet era. As the data show, economy and trade are indeed the most perceived aspects of cooperation for both China and Russia. Out of 115 reports addressing China, 63 (54.8%) received *economic cooperation* as a main code category. When adding the secondary category (16 reports), it is 74 reports (64.3%). Kazakhstan perceives China in the context of economic cooperation in more than half of all its reports.

In 103 reports dealing with Russia, 49 (47.6%) are coded with *economic cooperation* as the main category. With secondary categories (14 reports), it makes 63 reports (61.2%). Slightly below half of all Russia reports delve into economic cooperation, while more than half at least mention it. *Economic cooperation* occupies a smaller part of reports than in the case of China; however, the difference is insignificant.

Security and military cooperation was mentioned in secondary literature, especially in relation to Russia, as it strives to maintain its security presence in the former USSR state and both countries participate in the CSTO. Russia deployed soldiers to Kazakhstan in 2022—the period observed in the analysis—to help counter violent protests. Chinese security presence in CA has also been increasing, according to the literature.

However, as the analysis finds out, only very little attention is given to this aspect by Kazakhstan. It shows that this category is rather relevant to Russia but not to China. Out of the reports discussing China, only 5 were categorised as the main category of security and military cooperation, constituting 4.3%. Additionally, there were 8 assignments to the secondary category, totaling 13 reports (11.3%) that mentioned this theme.

The number is higher in the case of Russia. There were 13 main categories (12.6%) and 19 categories altogether (18.4%), including 6 secondary categories. The perception of Russia in the security sphere corresponds with the deployment of CSTO forces to Kazakhstan in January 2022, which falls within the period of 2020–22. This is reflected in the data, as 9 out of 13 reports with security and military cooperation as their main category appear in 2020–22. One of several reports discussing security cooperation in dealing with the protests mentions it as the “CSTO peacekeeping contingent”:

The President of Kazakhstan expressed gratitude to the Russian leader for his support in resolving the issue of sending a joint CSTO peacekeeping contingent to assist in restoring constitutional order and legality [...] [Президент Казахстана выразил признательность российскому лидеру за поддержку в решении вопроса о направлении объединенного миротворческого контингента ОДКБ для оказания содействия в восстановлении конституционного порядка и законности.] (Akorda, 2022a).

The second most relevant code category, *political and diplomatic cooperation*, is similarly important in the perceptions of China and Russia. Within 115 reports discussing China, 42 (36.5%) are coded with this category as a main one, and a total of 48 reports (41.7%) mention it. In the case of Russia, out of 103 reports, 34 (33%) have the main category of *political and diplomatic cooperation*, and altogether, 37 reports (35.9%) mention it. This result suggests that Kazakh officials perceive high and intensive diplomatic relations with both China and Russia. There is no change in this perception towards Russia after the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. For example, the following report about phone call between Kazakh and Russian presidents is from September 2022 and stresses “strategic partnership [стратегическое партнерство]” between the countries:

The leaders of Kazakhstan and Russia, in a spirit of mutual trust, exchanged views on the further development of relations of strategic partnership and alliance between the two states [...] [Лидеры Казахстана и России в духе взаимного доверия обменялись мнениями по дальнейшему развитию отношений стратегического партнерства и союзничества между двумя государствами.] (Akorda, 2022c).

Cross-border cooperation, the overall third most frequent code category in the main categories, is more relevant in the case of Russia. Within the China data, only 9 reports (7.8%) are coded as the main category. However, 11 reports received secondary categories of this theme, totaling 20 reports (17.4%). On the other hand, there are 17 reports (16.5%) addressing Russia that have cross-border cooperation as a main category, and including the secondary category (3 reports), it makes 20 reports (19.4%). Here, the difference is in the number of main categories. In the case of China, this category was frequently assigned as a secondary one. For example, the following two sentences mentioning “issues related to our common border [вопросы, связанные с нашей общей границей]” are part of a report primarily coded with *economic cooperation* and *political and diplomatic cooperation*, and *cross-border cooperation* only as a secondary category:

In particular, all issues related to our common border, which today has become a bridge of friendship and unity, have been resolved. The upcoming completion of negotiations on rivers on the border of Kazakhstan and China will be another bright page in the annals of interstate cooperation. [В частности, решены все вопросы, связанные с нашей общей границей, которая на сегодняшний день стала мостом дружбы и единства. Предстоящее завершение переговоров по рекам на границе Казахстана и Китая станет еще одной яркой страницей в летописи межгосударственного сотрудничества] (Akorda, 2022d).

Educational and scientific cooperation has been assigned the same number of main and secondary code categories as *security and military cooperation*. This result is rather unexpected based on the prominence of security aspects in secondary literature. Cooperation in the fields of education and science appears to play a role. Comparatively, more in the case of China. 11 reports (9.6%) are coded as the main category, with another 11 as the secondary category, for a total of 22 reports (19.1%). Within reports discussing

Russia, there are 6 of them (5.8%), which have *educational and scientific cooperation* as a main category. When including 4 reports as secondary categories, the total comes to 10 reports (9.7%).

Next in line is *cultural cooperation*, with a bit lower perception as a main category. Out of the reports addressing China, 7 (6.1%) have this main category. However, 14 reports (12.2%) are assigned the secondary category of cultural cooperation, totaling 21 reports (18.3%) at least somehow mentioning this aspect. In the case of Russia, there are 9 reports (8.7%) with the main category of *cultural cooperation* and 12 reports with the secondary category, for a total of 21 reports (20.4%). *Cultural cooperation* is a unique code category in its low frequency as the main category but high frequency as a secondary one (second highest number of secondary categories, after economic cooperation). The cultural aspect of cooperation is thus often acknowledged as part of the country-to-country interactions, but it is not the primary focus. In many cases, cooperation in the cultural sphere is only mentioned as one of many aspects and is not discussed in greater detail:

An important step forward was the adoption of the Roadmap format, covering such strategic areas as security, transport and logistics, energy and industry, combating climate change, the green economy, the IT industry, healthcare, education, culture, tourism, and other important areas. [...] [Важным шагом вперёд стало принятие формата Дорожной карты, охватывающей такие стратегические направления, как безопасность, транспорт и логистика, энергетика и промышленность, борьба с изменением климата, «зелёная» экономика, IT-индустрия, здравоохранение, образование, культура, туризм и другие важные сферы.] (MFA RK, 2022b).

The least frequent category is *environmental cooperation*. Within China perception, it has only 4 assignments (3.5%) as the main category, and including secondary categories, there are 10 assignments (8.7%). Among the reports dealing with Russia, 5 (4.9%) are categorised under the main category of environmental cooperation, and with the addition of 1 secondary category, there are a total of 6 reports (5.8%) mentioning it.

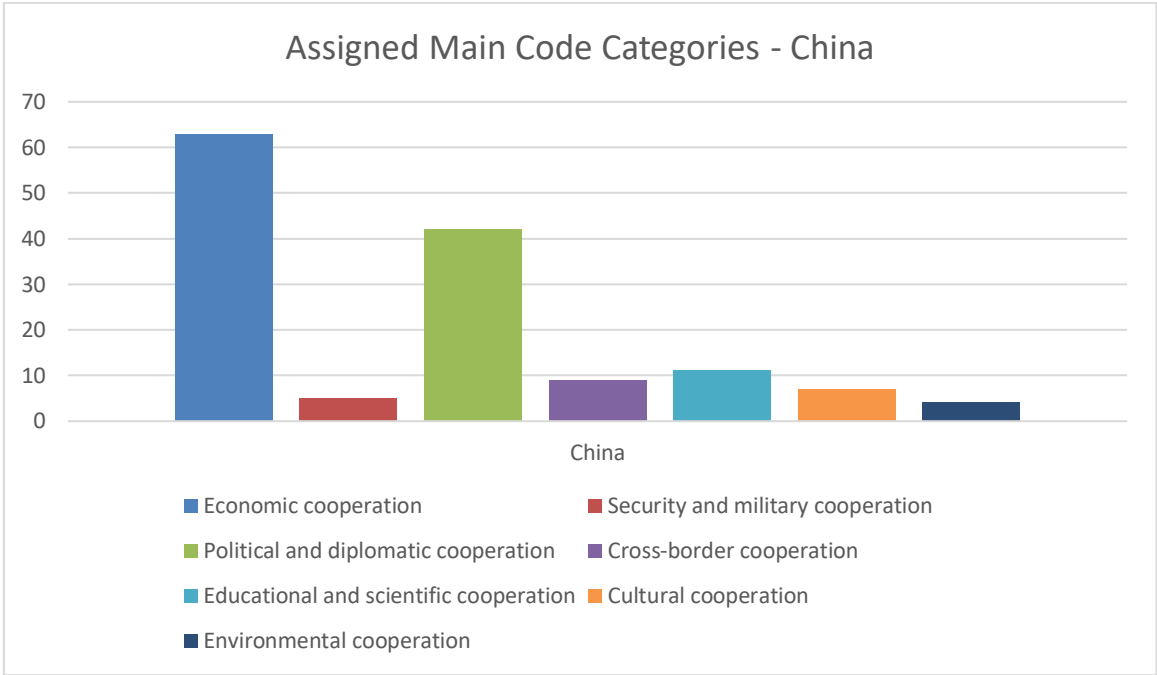


Figure 6: Distribution of Main Code Categories in the Perception of China



Figure 7: Distribution of Main Code Categories in the Perception of Russia.

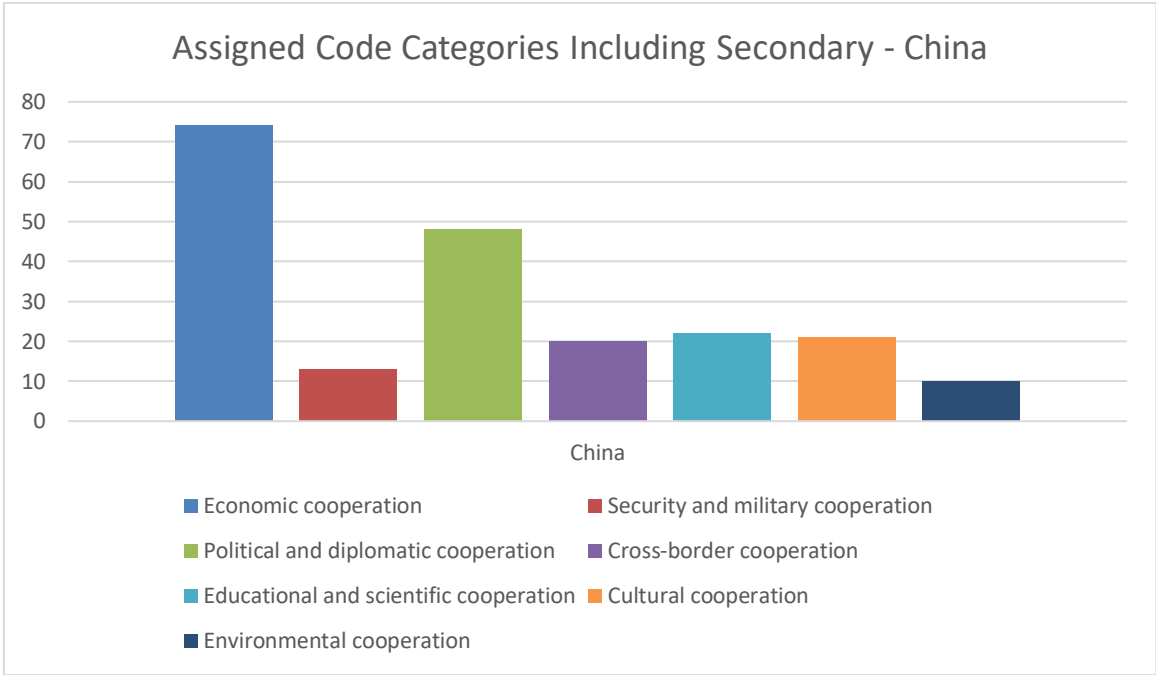


Figure 8: Distribution of All Code Categories Including Secondary in the Perception of China.

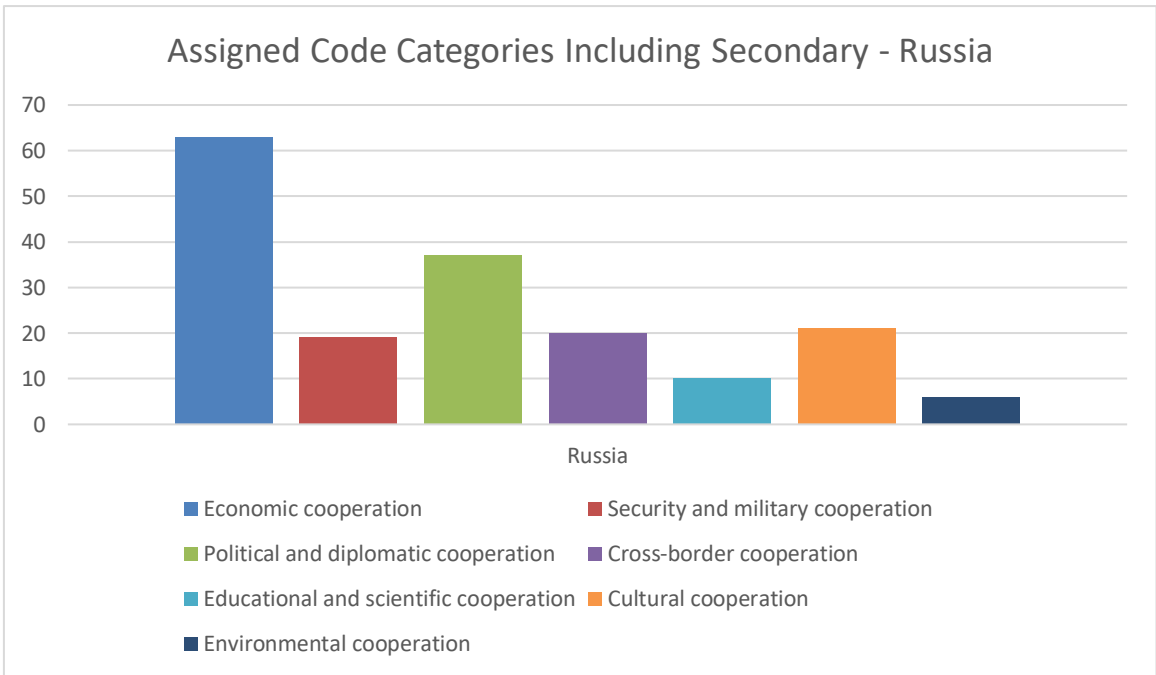


Figure 9: Distribution of All Code Categories Including Secondary in the Perception of Russia.

6.3.2 Comparison of Slots: Perception of China

There are eight individual slots for each type of website (government and president), analysed period (2020-22 and 2022-23), and perceived country (China and Russia). Here, four larger slots differentiating only the period and perceived country are used: *China in 2020–22*, *China in 2022–23*, *Russia in 2020–22*, and *Russia in 2022–23*.⁵ Each of these four slots is analysed, detailing the number of reports they contain and their most frequently assigned main code categories. The typical reports within each slot are introduced, accompanied by examples, while out-of-the-ordinary reports that deviate from the majority are described. Finally, a comparison is drawn between the slots to ascertain whether there are any notable changes in perception towards each country before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The first slot consists of the data perceiving *China in 2020–22* and includes 37 reports. The two most frequent main code categories (as in all four slots) are *economic cooperation* and *political and diplomatic cooperation*, with 18 (48.6%)⁶ and 19 (51.4%) coded reports, respectively. However, this is the only slot where political and diplomatic cooperation is more frequent (although only marginally) than *economic cooperation*.

There is one report coded with *security and military cooperation* as the main category. Published on January 8, 2022, a meeting between a Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs official and a Chinese ambassador refers to the situation around violent protests in Kazakhstan, which took place at the beginning of January 2022:

[...] According to the diplomat, the Chinese side resolutely opposes any forces that undermine stability and security in Kazakhstan. China is a loyal friend and reliable partner for our country. The minister informed about the situation in the country and the counter-terrorism operation carried out with the participation of CSTO forces. [По словам дипломата, китайская сторона решительно выступает

⁵ These four slots are different to the four slots in *5.1 Data Collection*, where the slots are divided according to the website type and time period for the purpose of data collection. The eight individual slots are the same.

⁶ Percentage within reports of the respective slot.

против любых сил, подрывающих стабильность и безопасность в Казахстане, а Китай является верным другом и надежным партнером нашей страны. Министр проинформировал о ситуации в стране и контртеррористической операции, проводимой с участием сил ОДКБ.] (MFA KZ, 2022a)

In reaction to the protests, China indeed offered security support for Kazakhstan, as security in the neighbouring region is important for it (Reuters, 2022).

In this slot, *political and diplomatic cooperation* includes high-level consultations between presidents who stress the strategic partnership between China and Kazakhstan:

The leaders of the two countries expressed the opinion that regular, confidential dialogue at the highest level is the key to the progressive strengthening of a long-term, comprehensive strategic partnership. [...] [Руководители двух стран высказали мнение, что регулярный доверительный диалог на высшем уровне является залогом поступательного укрепления долгосрочного всестороннего стратегического партнерства] (Akorda, 2021b).

Another typical report coded with *political and diplomatic cooperation* includes the commemoration of 30 years of Kazakh independence and the anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with China:

In the framework of a series of events dedicated to the 30th anniversary of Kazakhstan's independence, as well as on the eve of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the People's Republic of China, the Kazakh diplomatic mission in Beijing held a meeting with members of the "Club of Friends of Kazakhstan in China". [...] [В рамках серии мероприятий, посвященных 30-летию Независимости Казахстана, а также в преддверии 30-летия установления дипломатических отношений между Республикой Казахстан и Китайской Народной Республикой, в казахстанском дипломатическом представительстве в Пекине прошла встреча с членами «Клуба друзей Казахстана в Китае»] (MFA RK, 2021a).

Economic cooperation also appears a lot, and it discusses business meetings between political elites, the economic condition and trade balance between Kazakhstan and China, or updates on the movement of goods on the border. This report addresses Kazakh participation in the trade exhibition in Shanghai:

The grand opening of the Kazakhstan pavilion at the International Import Exhibition (CIIE 2020) took place today in Shanghai. The ceremony was attended by the Ambassador Extraordinary Plenipotentiary of Kazakhstan to China, Gabit Koishibaev, representatives of foreign trade organisations, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), and more than 30 official foreign delegations. The Minister of Trade and Integration of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Bakhyt Sultanov, sent a welcoming speech to the exhibition participants. [...] [Сегодня в Шанхае состоялось торжественное открытие казахстанского павильона на Международной выставке импортных товаров (СИЕ 2020). Участниками церемонии стали Чрезвычайный Полномочный Посол Казахстана в Китае Габит Койшибаев, представители внешнеторговых организаций, компании PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), более 30 официальных иностранных делегаций. Приветственное слово участникам выставки направил министр торговли и интеграции РК Бахыт Султанов] (MTI RK, 2020).

Economic cooperation, beyond the mentioned reports, contains one case with a minor degree of criticism towards China. In the report, Kazakh Vice Minister of Trade and Integration Kairat Torebaev reacts to “issues raised by citizens [вопросы, поднятые гражданами]” (MTI RK, 2021), one of which is about potentially increasing coal exports to China. The minister states that although Kazakhstan is working on it, there are still barriers and restrictions on the Chinese side:

[...] The vice minister also noted that there are certain barriers, such as the limited capacity of the border crossing, restrictions from the Chinese side on the transshipment of bulk cargo from wagon gauge 1520 mm to wagon gauge 1435 mm, and high tariffs from "Chinese Railways" for the transport of coal from Kazakhstan on Chinese railways. [...] [Также вице-министр отметил, что есть определенные барьеры, такие как: ограниченная пропускная способность пограничного перехода, ограничения с китайской стороны на перегрузку

массовых грузов с вагонов колеи 1520 мм в вагоны колеи 1435 мм, высокие тарифы «Китайские железные дороги» на перевозку по китайским железным дорогам каменного угля из Казахстана] (MTI RK, 2021).

The criticism is indeed minimal, but it is an expression of discontent from the government representative, which is not typical in most of the other reports.

The last report from the first slot presented here is a highly non-typical and, within the context of the data, strongly critical report. An article titled *Soft Power? Why did the main newspaper of China "speak" in Kazakh [«Мягкая сила»? Зачем главная газета Китая «заговорила» на казахском]* (CLP, 2021), which is coded as *non-cooperation in the cultural field* and *non-cooperation in the political field*, discusses Chinese growing soft power and cultural influence on Kazakhstan. The discussed topic is, at the time newly added, the Kazakh language mutation of the *Chinese Communist Party's* (hereinafter CCP) online version of the *People's Daily [renmin ribao 人民日报]* newspaper. The report explores whether this fact means increasing Chinese influence or not and quotes several experts who either agree or disagree. The first one disagrees:

Poet and researcher Almas Akhmetbekuly, who moved from China many years ago, said the appearance of the People's Daily page in Kazakh is not a political event and should not be linked to Chinese expansion. According to him, the appearance in Kazakh "only indicates that the use of the language is expanding" [...] [Поэт и исследователь Алмас Ахметбекұлы, много лет назад переехавший из Китая, считает, что появление страницы «Жэньминь жибао» на казахском не является событием политического плана и связывать это с китайской экспансией не следует. По его словам, выход на казахском «свидетельствует лишь о том, что применение языка расширяется»] (CLP, 2021).

However, another two experts view China as indeed increasing its influence:

China is one of Kazakhstan's largest investors. China has already reached a level where it can economically influence Kazakhstan at a certain level. But there is a language barrier. Now they want to propagate Chinese policy in Kazakh. [...] [Китай — один из крупнейших инвесторов Казахстана. Китай уже достиг

такого уровня, что может на определенном уровне экономически влиять на Казахстан. Но есть языковой барьер. Теперь они хотят пропагандировать китайскую политику на казахском языке] (CLP, 2021).

Furthermore, this report touches upon the issue of the Chinese government's censorship towards ethnic Kazakhs living in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region and even mentions Xinjiang internment camps, a topic normally not discussed by Kazakh officials:

Meanwhile, there are speculations about increased pressure on the Kazakh-language press inside Xinjiang, a Chinese region that the world media compare to a huge concentration camp because of the ongoing repression of indigenous peoples. [...] [Между тем выдвигаются предположения об ужесточении давления на казахоязычную прессу внутри Синьцзяна — китайского региона, который мировые СМИ из-за продолжающихся репрессий против коренных народов сравнивают с огромным концлагерем] (CLP, 2021).

In the second slot, regarding perceptions of *China in 2022–23*, the total number of reports notably rose to 78. The increase of 110.8% from 37 in the first slot indicates that after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Kazakhstan directed greater attention towards China. The most frequent main code category is *economic cooperation* with 45 (57.7%) reports, and second is *political and diplomatic cooperation* with 23 (29.5%) reports.

Reports coded with *political and diplomatic cooperation* are similar to those in the first slot, and there is mostly no discussion of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and possible reactions to it. They usually address the development of strategic partnerships, cooperation within multilateral organisations, or commemorate the anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. E.g., there is also a report about the opening of a new diplomatic mission: *The President opened the Consulate General of Kazakhstan in Xi'an* [Президент открыл Генеральное консульство Казахстана в Сиане] (Akorda, 2023a).

However, there is a report assigned to both *economic cooperation* and *political and diplomatic cooperation* as the main category (and *cross-border cooperation* as a sub-category), which contains a warning towards Russia. In this report, the Chinese president states:

[...] No matter how the international situation changes, we will continue to resolutely support Kazakhstan in protecting its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, firmly support the reforms you are carrying out to ensure stability and development, and categorically oppose the interference of any forces in the internal affairs of your country [...] [Как бы ни менялась международная конъюнктура, мы будем и впредь решительно поддерживать Казахстан в защите независимости, суверенитета и территориальной целостности, твердо поддерживать проводимые Вами реформы по обеспечению стабильности и развития, категорически выступать против вмешательства каких-либо сил во внутренние дела Вашей страны] (Akorda, 2022e).

Some observers (Lillis, 2022b; Konarzewska, 2023) understand it as a warning to Russia not to jeopardise Kazakh sovereignty. It follows rhetorical threats towards Kazakhstan from Russian politicians because Kazakhstan has not supported the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Lillis, 2022a). Although this fact hints at the security dimension, it is still considered political cooperation, as the statement only supports Kazakh sovereignty and territorial integrity and no actual security measures are mentioned.

As a slight increase from the one report coded in the main category of *security and military cooperation* before the Russian invasion, there are 4 such reports in the second slot. It includes meetings of the president or Kazakh minister of defence with the Chinese minister of defence, but also addresses security in a broader sense as protection against natural disasters. Nevertheless, we can see that there is a small increase in perceptions of security interactions with China. Also taking into account the previous example of *political and diplomatic cooperation*.

This slot, however, involves one report coded as *non-cooperation in the security and military fields*. It positively views *China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis* [guanyu zhengzhi jieju wukelan weiji de zhongguo lichang 关于政治解决乌克兰危机的中国立场] (MFA PRC, 2023)—a Chinese document published in February 2023 with general principles that should lead to a peaceful end of the Russian war in Ukraine. The report *Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of*

Kazakhstan on the position of the PRC [Заявление МИД РК по позиции КНР] states that Kazakhstan welcomes and strongly supports this Chinese initiative:

The Republic of Kazakhstan welcomes the position of the People's Republic of China on the political settlement of the Ukrainian crisis, which deserves support as contributing to the cessation of bloodshed based on territorial integrity, independence, and sovereignty of states in accordance with the fundamental principles of the Charter of the United Nations. [Республика Казахстан приветствует позицию Китайской Народной Республики по политическому урегулированию украинского кризиса, которая заслуживает поддержки как способствующая прекращению кровопролития на основе территориальной целостности, независимости и суверенитета государств в соответствии с основополагающими принципами Устава Организации Объединенных Наций] (MFA RK, 2023a).

In *economic cooperation*, similarly to the period before the invasion, there are reports discussing participation in trade exhibitions, mutual trade volume, and meetings between high politicians. Compared to the first slot, there are several reports addressing economic cooperation between specific regions. For example, the following report is about cooperation between the Kazakh Zhetysu region and the Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture of Xinjiang Autonomous Region in China:

Cooperation between the Zhetysu region and the Ili-Kazakh autonomous region of China is intensifying. Today, as part of a meeting between regional akim Beibit Isabaev and representatives of the Chinese delegation, a number of important documents were signed aimed at strengthening and developing bilateral ties, including a framework agreement on trade and economic cooperation [...] [Активизируется сотрудничество между областью Жетысу и Иле-Кзахской автономной областью Китая. Сегодня в рамках встречи акима области Бейбита Исабаева с представителями китайской делегации был подписан ряд важных документов, направленных на укрепление и развитие двусторонних связей, в том числе рамочное соглашение о торгово-экономическом сотрудничестве] (AZR, 2023).

There is also a higher number of reports (9), with *educational and scientific cooperation* as the main category in the second slot. It includes the signing of agreements and mutual visits between various universities and academic and scientific institutions.

Overall, the content of reports before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine is similar. However, there are few instances suggesting that Kazakh elites increasingly lean towards China. As shown when addressing the Russian invasion in cases of Chinese support for Kazakhstan after Russian threats and Kazakh support for Chinese position document. Compared to the first slot, there are also no reports critical of China. Furthermore, the significant growth of reports addressing China also indicates increased attention towards the country.

6.3.3 Comparison of Slots: Perception of Russia

The third and fourth slots are dedicated to the data exploring perceptions of Russia before and after its invasion of Ukraine. The third slot concerns *Russia in 2020–22*, and it includes 46 reports. That is more than in the case of perception of China in the same period (37 reports), indicating that before the invasion, Russia enjoyed higher attention than China. The most frequent main code categories are *economic cooperation* and *political and diplomatic cooperation*, with 19 (41.3%) and 18 (39.1%) reports, respectively.

There are 9 reports coded with *security and military cooperation* as the main category. Compared to only one such report in the first slot (perception of *China in 2020–22*), Russia was perceived more in the security field than China before the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The content of these reports includes joint military exercises, meetings of security officials, the shipment of military equipment, and discussing the deployment of Russian forces to help with Kazakh violent protests in January 2022:

The President of Kazakhstan expressed gratitude to the Russian leader for his support in resolving the issue of sending a joint CSTO peacekeeping contingent to assist in restoring constitutional order and legality. [...] [Президент Казахстана выразил признательность российскому лидеру за поддержку в решении вопроса о направлении объединенного миротворческого контингента ОДКБ

для оказания содействия в восстановлении конституционного порядка и законности] (Akorda, 2022a).

Reports coded with *political and diplomatic cooperation* discuss meetings of high-level politicians, including presidents, prime ministers, and ministers. In these meetings, strategic partnership, bilateral cooperation, and cooperation within multilateral organisations are addressed, for example:

There is a lot of work ahead to promote strategic partnership and truly allied relations between our countries. To do this, all efforts must be directed towards achieving concrete results on the issues that are already on the agenda [...] [Предстоит очень большая работа по продвижению стратегического партнерства и поистине союзнических отношений между нашими странами. Для этого нужно направить все усилия на достижение конкретных результатов по тем вопросам, которые уже внесены в повестку дня] (Akorda, 2022f).

Other reports within this category contain mutual congratulations to Kazakh 30 years of independence anniversary and to *Russian National Unity Day* [День народного единства]:

Russian President Vladimir Putin cordially congratulated the Head of State on Independence Day, [...] [Президент России Владимир Путин сердечно поздравив Главу государства с Днем Независимости] (Akorda, 2021c).

Report titled *Famous Russian journalist awarded the Order of Dostyk* [Известный российский журналист удостоен ордена «Достык»] (MFA RK, 2021b) is also included in the *political and diplomatic cooperation* category. It informs about an award given by the Kazakh state to a Russian journalist. It appears that some kind of journalistic cooperation category might be used. However, within all the data, this is the only case about a journalist; therefore, it could not make a specific code category. Furthermore, there is a political aspect to this report, as it is an official award of Kazakhstan, which the journalist received “for his contribution to the development of relations between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation” (MFA RK, 2021b). Therefore, the code category of *political and diplomatic cooperation* is the most appropriate.

Economic cooperation in the third slot consists of reports addressing mutual trade volume, cooperation in the energy sector, cooperation in the aviation sector, meetings with business delegations, and likewise to the perception of China, participation in economic forums. The difference between the first two slots is the bigger focus on cooperation in the energy sector and the aviation sector.

Within *cultural cooperation*, there is one non-typical (unique in all data) report dealing with religious cooperation. It presents a meeting between the Kazakh ambassador to Russia (Kazakhstan being a secular Muslim-majority country) and the chairman of the spiritual administration of Muslims in Russia:

During the meeting, which took place in a warm and friendly atmosphere, the two countries discussed interaction in the development of inter-religious dialogue. [...]
[В ходе встречи, прошедшей в теплой и дружественной обстановке, было обсуждено взаимодействие двух стран в развитии межрелигиозного диалога] (MFA RK, 2021c).

The last slot, dealing with perceptions of Russia after the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022–23), consists of 57 reports. That is an increase of 23.9% from the pre-invasion period (46 reports). In the case of China, the increase in the number of reports after the invasion is 110.8%. Compared to 23.9% in the case of perception of Russia, it is clear that the invasion led to higher attention towards China by Kazakh officials. The most reports in this last slot are coded with *economic cooperation*: 30 reports (52.6%) and *political and diplomatic cooperation*: 16 reports (28.1%). The big lead in *economic cooperation* suggests heightened focus on the economic field after the invasion.

There are 4 reports coded with *security cooperation* as the main category (down from 9 before the invasion). Furthermore, they do not suggest that Kazakhstan perceives Russia as a cooperative partner in security in a narrow sense. The reports discuss cooperation in protection against emergencies and cooperation in fighting organised crime. Another report is about the meeting within the Central Asia-Russia summit, where the Kazakh president talks about inner-state security: “[...] jointly combating terrorism, extremism, and illicit trafficking in weapons and drugs [...] [совместной борьбы с

терроризмом, экстремизмом, незаконным оборотом оружия и наркотиков]” (Akorda, 2022g). Only one brief report addresses military cooperation:

Working consultations between representatives of the Department of International Cooperation of the Ministry of Defence of Kazakhstan and representatives of the Attaché Office for Defence Affairs at the Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Kazakhstan were held in Nur-Sultan. The parties discussed issues of bilateral military and military-technical cooperation. [Рабочие консультации представителей Департамента международного сотрудничества Министерства обороны Казахстана с представителями Аппарата атташе по вопросам обороны при Посольстве Российской Федерации в Республике Казахстан проведены в Нур-Султане. Стороны обсудили вопросы двустороннего военного и военно-технического сотрудничества] (MD KZ, 2022).

However, there are 3 reports that are assigned *non-cooperation in the security* code category. This is indeed influenced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The first report contains the following paragraph:

Despite the fact that what happened in Russia was its internal affair, Kazakhstanis were concerned about the situation in a friendly country with which Kazakhstan has the longest border in the world. [...] [Несмотря на то, что произошедшее в России является ее внутренним делом, казахстанцы с обеспокоенностью восприняли ситуацию в дружественной стране, с которой Казахстан имеет самую протяженную границу в мире.] (Akorda, 2023b).

Published on June 25, 2023, this report hints at the Wagner group rebellion that took place in Russia the days before (June 23–24, 2023). It is regarded as a security matter, which, however, does not pose a threat to Kazakhstan, and it rather stresses that it is not a security threat. Another *non-cooperation security* report addresses the same issue. It involves a call between Kazakh and Russian presidents, during which President Tokayev stated that the event is an internal matter of Russia (Akorda, 2023c).

The last report coded as *non-cooperation security* is from April 2022—again, a call between the presidents. However, this time, they mention the war in Ukraine:

[...] Vladimir Putin informed Kassym-Jomart Tokayev about the progress of Russian-Ukrainian negotiations. A common understanding was expressed of the exceptional importance of reaching agreements regarding the neutral, non-aligned, nuclear-free status of Ukraine. [Владимир Путин проинформировал Касым-Жомарта Токаева о ходе российско-украинских переговоров. Высказано общее понимание исключительной важности достижения договоренностей относительно нейтрального, внеблокового, безъядерного статуса Украины.] (Akorda, 2022h).

The reports coded with *political and diplomatic cooperation* as the main category mostly do not take the Russian invasion of Ukraine into account. Only in one case is there an indirect hint when Kazakh President Tokayev mentions: “Despite the difficult geopolitical situation, interaction with Russia, Kazakhstan’s key strategic partner, is developing dynamically [несмотря на непростую геополитическую обстановку, взаимодействие с Россией –ключевым стратегическим партнером Казахстана развивается динамично.]” (Akorda, 2022i). The rest of the reports include meetings between high-ranking politicians who talk about strategic partnerships, send mutual greetings to national holidays, commemorate anniversaries of the establishment of diplomatic relations, or commentary of press service of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which addresses high levels of political relations.

The *economic cooperation* in this slot contains various reports about mutual trade volume, meetings between high-level officials and ambassadors, who sign trade deals and discuss mutual economic relations, and the removal of trade barriers. Further, there are reports on meetings of business delegations and company representatives and participation in exhibitions. One report addresses the exchange of experience in anti-monopoly regulations.

However, there is also one report coded with *economic cooperation*, which mentions the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a “situation in Ukraine [ситуации в Украине]” (ARDFM, 2022). It was published on February 25, 2022, one day after the

launch of the invasion, and it discusses situation in financial market “against the background of the geopolitical situation in the world [на фоне геополитической обстановки в мире]” (ARDFM, 2022) and concludes that situation in Kazakhstan is stable.

To summarize the analysis results, the content of the reports did not change in majority of the cases. Similar meetings, discussions of strategic partnerships, volume trade, etc. appear in all slots, in perception of both, China and Russia, before and after Russian invasion. However, we can see a slight development from the data. In numbers, there was a higher perception of Russia before the invasion, but after the invasion, China was perceived more.

The most notable development can be seen in the categories *security and military cooperation and security field as non-cooperation*. In the case of Russia, perception of *security cooperation* decreased over time, and there were 3 reports of *non-cooperation security* all of them addressing war in Ukraine. Kazakhstan perceives war in Ukraine as a security issue, but maintains a distance, assures Russia, that it is not Kazakhstan’s business, but at the same time, Kazakhstan does not perceive Russia as a security partner, as it did before the invasion.

Attention was also paid to specific cases in other code categories, where the war in Ukraine was mentioned or hinted to. However, in comparison to the absolute majority of reports which remain the same in their content, these are exceptions. Also, when the war in Ukraine is mentioned, it is usually rather carefully and neutrally. Overall, the Kazakh elites’ perception of China and Russia remains unchanged, except few instances.

7. Other Perceptions

The analysis focused on perception in official narrative of Kazakh political elites, which is mostly positive and focuses on cooperation. It is obviously not a representative picture of how China and Russia are viewed in Kazakhstan more generally – in public opinion and by individuals in different spheres. To partially enlarge it, and complement the analysis, results from few studies exploring Kazakh perception of China and Russia in different discourses are presented.

According to several scholars, views toward China in Kazakh population are generally considered as rather negative. The perception is differentiated between political and business elites who view China positively, and public, which is sceptical toward China. (Arynov, 2023; Burkhanov and Chen, 2016). Burkahov and Chen (2016) conducted analysis focusing on different period, therefore this is not to compare with results of this thesis, rather to illustrate perception of China in Kazakhstan. They analysed the perspective on China and Chinese from Kazakh media. In Kazakhstan, media are either state-controlled or affiliated to large companies, and they do not produce independent journalism. Burkahov and Chen (2016) discovered that state-sponsored media are in line with official governmental narrative, while private often report negatively of China, and spread Sinophobia.

Arynov (2023) examined the view of Kazakh students who studied in China, and found out they see China more positively, than general public. They perceive China especially as an economic opportunity for Kazakhstan – in line with the mostly coded *economic cooperation* in my analysis. They also view China as a challenge, but rather blame Kazakh government for being unable to cope with China.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of reports published by the official websites of the Kazakh president and government, this thesis explores the perceptions of China and Russia in the official discourse of Kazakh elites. The aim was to find out how it evolved over a period of one and a half years before and one and a half years after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Whether the invasion had any impact on perception or not. The thesis focused on the content of reports and observed the main areas in which China and Russia were perceived.

With the use of qualitative content analysis combined with quantitative aspects and its coding process, the principal perceived thematic categories were identified, and then the data were systematically coded into them. The coded reports were analysed with regard to their perceived country and period of publication. Typically occurring reports were presented, but also those out-of-the-ordinary and those addressing the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The results are described narratively and also quantified; the numbers and percentages of individual categories are presented and compared.

To answer the research question, the perception of Kazakh official representatives, as published in the reports, did not change, with a few exceptions. When quantified, the results show that attention towards China increased after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, within perceptions of Russia, after the invasion, perceptions of security and military cooperation declined, and perceptions of economic cooperation increased.

The Kazakh officials continued to see China and Russia in a similar way; they saw them as, for example, business partners or politically strategic partners both before and after the invasion. There is no general shift in the perceived content; the reports across all the analysed slots are similar. They contain, for example, commemorations of the anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations or reports on the situation of mutual trade. These reports, which represent the majority, remain the same or very similar across all the analysed period.

However, the few specific, out-of-the-ordinary reports show that, to some extent, the invasion of Ukraine was reflected by Kazakh officials. That can be seen, especially in the case of non-cooperation security field reports regarding Russia. It indicates that Kazakhstan acknowledges what is happening but does not want to be connected with it and does not perceive Russia as a security partner to the extent it did before the invasion.

A constructivist approach based on Alexander Wendt's work was applied. Perception is an important factor co-constituting state's behaviour, but at the same time perception is co-constituted by the behaviour. That is, e.g., a report of a meeting between politicians comes from the fact that the meeting did take place and the officials consider it important to report on it. This fact plays a role in possible future decisions about whether to participate in other meetings, etc. Furthermore, the influence of China and Russia is co-constituted by how Kazakh representatives view those countries. Therefore, the increased perception of China after the invasion suggests higher Chinese influence. The decrease in perception of Russia as a security partner suggests lower Russian influence in security aspects.

With this theoretical approach, the analysis contributed to the existing literature, which mostly applies realism and focuses on Chinese and Russian points of view. As the majority of the literature stresses economic and security aspects of relations, my study presenting Kazakh perceptions shows that the economic aspect is indeed strongly important in relation to both China and Russia, but the security aspect is perceived much less than the literature suggests.

However, most of the literature deals with the whole CA, and the security aspect might play a stronger role in case studies of other CA countries. Also, some literature and journalist publications claim that CA countries no longer view Russia as their primary security guarantor and try to distance themselves from Russia, which the analysis confirms. Some scholars and journalists point out that Kazakh-Russian relations have worsened since 2014 (this analysis cannot comment on that) and since 2022. Overall, the analysis shows that the elites' perception has not changed; however, the security field might be an aspect of slightly worsening relations.

This thesis fills the gap in the literature by adding a case study of the perception of a CA country towards China and Russia. It is limited to only showing the officially published perception of the president and government, which is not representative of the whole Kazakhstan (as shown in Chapter 7). However, it brings useful insight into Kazakh foreign policy and diplomacy with regard to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, as the role of CA countries is often debated.

Summary

Prostřednictvím analýzy zpráv zveřejněných na oficiálních webových stránkách kazašského prezidenta a vlády prozkoumala tato práce vnímání Číny a Ruska v oficiálním diskurzu kazašských elit. Cílem bylo zjistit, jak se ono vnímání vyvíjelo v období jednoho a půl roku před a jednoho a půl roku po ruské invazi na Ukrajinu v roce 2022. Zda měla invaze na vnímání nějaký vliv, či nikoliv. Práce se zaměřila na obsah zpráv a sledovala hlavní témata, v nichž byly Čína a Rusko vnímány.

S využitím kvalitativní obsahové analýzy a jejího procesu kódování byly identifikovány hlavní tematické kategorie a následně do nich data systematicky kódována. Nakódované zprávy byly analyzovány s ohledem na zemi na kterou se zaměřují a na období zveřejnění. Analýza představila typicky se vyskytující zprávy, ale zaměřila se také na specifické a neobvyklé zprávy, a na ty, které zmiňovaly ruskou invazi na Ukrajinu. Výsledky jsou popsány narativně, a také kvantifikovány – jsou uvedeny počty a procenta jednotlivých kategorií.

Vnímání kazašských oficiálních představitelů, jak bylo zveřejněno v jejich zprávách, se až na výjimky nezměnilo. Při kvantifikaci výsledků se ukázalo, že pozornost vůči Číně se po ruské invazi na Ukrajinu zvýšila. Dále v rámci vnímání Ruska po invazi pokleslo vnímání v oblasti bezpečnosti a vojenské spolupráce a vzrostlo vnímání v oblasti ekonomické spolupráce.

Kazašští představitelé nadále vnímali Čínu a Rusko podobně, před invazí i po ní je vnímali například jako obchodní partnery nebo politicky strategické partnery. K žádnému obecnému posunu ve vnímání nedošlo a zprávy napříč všemi analyzovanými sloty jsou podobné. Obsahují například připomínání výročí navázání diplomatických vztahů nebo zprávy o situaci ve vzájemném obchodu. Tyto zprávy, které představují většinu, zůstávají napříč celým analyzovaným obdobím stále stejné nebo velmi podobné.

Několik konkrétních nestandardních zpráv však ukazuje, že invaze na Ukrajinu byla kazašskými představiteli do jisté míry reflektována. To je patrné zejména v případě zpráv z kategorie nespolečné spolupráce v oblasti bezpečnosti ve vztahu k Rusku. Naznačuje to, že Kazachstán si uvědomuje, co se děje, ale nechce s tím být spojován a nevnímá již Rusko jako bezpečnostního partnera v takové míře jako před invazí.

Práce aplikuje konstruktivistický přístup vycházející z práce Alexandra Wendta.

Vnímání je důležitý faktor spoluurčující jednání státu, ale zároveň je vnímání spoluurčováno jednáním. To znamená, že např. zpráva o setkání politiků vychází z toho, že se setkání skutečně uskutečnilo a oficiální představitelé považují za důležité o něm informovat. Tato skutečnost hraje roli při případném budoucím rozhodování, zda se zúčastnit dalších setkání apod.

Vliv Číny a Ruska je spoluurčován tím, jak kazašští představitelé tyto země vnímají. Proto zvýšené vnímání Číny Kazachstánem po invazi naznačuje větší čínský vliv. Pokles vnímání Ruska jako bezpečnostního partnera naznačuje nižší ruský vliv v bezpečnostním aspektu.

Tento teoretický přístup přispívá k existující literatuře, která většinou uplatňuje realismus a zaměřuje se na čínský a ruský pohled. Zatímco většina literatury zdůrazňuje ekonomické a bezpečnostní aspekty vztahů, tato studie prezentující kazašské vnímání ukazuje, že ekonomický aspekt je skutečně velmi důležitý ve vztahu k Číně i Rusku, ale bezpečnostní aspekt je vnímán mnohem méně než ukazuje literatura.

Většina literatury se však zabývá celou Střední Asií a bezpečnostní aspekt by mohl hrát větší roli v případových studiích jiných zemí Střední Asie. V některé literatuře a novinářských publikacích se také uvádí, že země Střední Asie již nevnímají Rusko jako svého hlavního bezpečnostního garanta a snaží se od něj distancovat. Někteří odborníci a novináři poukazují na to, že se kazašsko-ruské vztahy po roce 2014 (to nemohu komentovat) a po roce 2022 zhoršily. Celkově tato analýza ukazuje, že vnímání elit se nezměnilo, nicméně bezpečnostní oblast může být tím aspektem mírného zhoršení vztahů.

Tato práce doplňuje mezeru v literatuře o případovou studii vnímání jedné středoasijské země vůči Číně a Rusku. Omezuje se pouze na oficiálně publikované vnímání prezidenta a vlády, které není reprezentativní pro celý Kazachstán (jak ukazuje kapitola 7). Přináší však užitečný vhled do kazašské zahraniční politiky a diplomacie s ohledem na ruskou invazi na Ukrajinu v roce 2022, neboť role zemí Střední Asie je často diskutována.

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