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MIDDLE POWERS AS A FACTOR IN GLOBAL GEOPOLITICS

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The brochure presented to the reader explores the main theoretical and methodological approaches to defining the concept of middle powers. It also attempts to assess the role and participation of middle powers, including the Republic of Kazakhstan, in shaping the foundations of a new model of the world order.

This scientific publication is intended for a wide audience and can be used as an analytical, scientific, methodological, and source base for international relations experts, political scientists, teachers, and students specializing in international relations.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
APAC	Asia-Pacific Region
BRICS	An informal intergovernmental association that includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Indonesia
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
WTO	World Trade Organization
WHO	World Health Organization
N-11 Group	A collective term for eleven emerging economies: Mexico, Nigeria, Egypt, Türkiye, Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Vietnam, South Korea, and the Philippines, identified by Goldman Sachs analyst Jim O’Neill as countries with a high potential to become major drivers of the global economic system in the 21st century, alongside the BRICS nations.
IBSA	An informal intergovernmental association comprising India, Brazil, and South
IPR	Indo-Pacific Region
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EU	European Union
ECB	European Central Bank
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MERCOSUR	The largest integration association in South America, representing a common market of six countries of the region (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Venezuela (membership suspended in 2016), Paraguay, and Uruguay)
MIST (MIKT)	A term coined in 2011 by analyst Jim O’Neill to describe fast-growing economies: Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, and Türkiye

MIKTA	An informal intergovernmental partnership among Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Türkiye, and Australia
NAFTA	The North American Free Trade Agreement between Canada, the United States, and Mexico, signed on December 17, 1992, and entered into force on January 1, 1994
UAE	United Arab Emirates
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
UN	United Nations
OTS	Organization of Turkic States
ECO	Economic Cooperation Organization
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
GCC	Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (Gulf Cooperation Council)
XUAR	Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (China)
HAMAS	Palestinian military-political organization
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

PREFACE

In the first quarter of the 21st century, the world has entered a pivotal stage of its development. We are witnessing the emergence of a new world order, the essence of which lies in the formation of a multipolar system of international relations. This process is reshaping the global balance of power and redefining the roles of key actors in international politics, while shifting the paradigm of global development toward the growing influence of middle powers. Today, these middle-level states are becoming the driving forces of transformation in the geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape. While the significant role of great powers in the global system has traditionally been undisputed, the expanding opportunities and prospects of middle powers in the configuration of the future world order are attracting increasing interest not only among the academic community but also among policymakers, business representatives, and civil society engaged in international affairs.

In this regard, the proposed brochure highlights the main theoretical and methodological approaches to defining the concept of middle powers and attempts to assess the role and participation of middle powers, including the Republic of Kazakhstan, in shaping the foundations of a new model of world order.

In particular, the first chapter presents the author's vision of defining criteria for the concept of "middle powers," establishes the role of middle-level states in the global coordinate system, and outlines the characteristic features of their foreign policy strategies. The conclusion about the strengthening of the positions of middle powers in the future world order is of important methodological significance.

The second chapter reviews Kazakhstan's diplomacy as a middle power. In this context, it highlights the country's foreign policy steps on the international arena, embodying the priority of national interests, proactive multivectorism, joint and independent initiatives, mediation efforts, and peacemaking. It reveals Kazakhstan's view on global and regional issues, our country's participation in global and regional security issues, and the promotion of international cooperation.

This publication is intended for a wide audience of international relations experts, political scientists, teachers, and students specializing in international relations.

I THE ROLE OF MIDDLE POWERS IN GLOBAL PROCESSES

1.1. CRITERIA FOR A MIDDLE POWER

The expansion of the number of so-called “middle powers” forming an independent layer of subjects of international relations became a noticeable trend in the development of the post-war world order. According to Wikipedia, this group includes 52 countries of the world.

A review of academic research by British scholars shows that, in theory, middle power status is usually determined in one of two ways. The traditional and most common method is to aggregate critical physical and material criteria to assess states according to their relative capabilities. The second method, which has become more prevalent in recent years, focuses on the behavioral characteristics of middle powers that distinguish them from “great powers” and small states. It is believed that the niche of middle powers is a regional sphere of ambition and influence, a focus on a stable and secure international environment, and nationally oriented interests served by diplomatic channels.

The authors of the book “Middle Powers in the Multipolar World” published by the Institute for Peace & Diplomacy (USA–Canada), offer their original vision of the status of middle powers, based on an inter-civilizational and cultural approach. In their view, middle powers are best defined across four vectors:

1. Enduring regional presence and geographic rootedness.
2. Considerable economic and military capacity relative to neighbors.
3. Historical and cultural pedigree as civilizational states.
4. The regionally-focused, limited extent of their ambitions – they seek not world domination but a sphere of influence in their near-abroad, matching their historical range and scope. [1].

At the same time, each civilizational hub, represented by middle powers, serves as a cornerstone of the regional security complex [1].

The search for an acceptable definition of middle powers is complicated, among other things, by the fact that they are extremely heterogeneous in terms of socio-economic, military-political, and other characteristics (Türkiye, South Korea, India, etc.). On the

¹The concept of a “middle power” was first formulated in the works of the 16th-century Italian thinker Giovanni Botero, who divided states into three types: *grandissime* (empires), *mezano* (middle powers), and *piccolo* (small states). According to Botero, middle powers are “...sufficiently strong and authoritative to exist independently, without external assistance.” However, the term “middle power” became widely used in international political science only after World War II, when the Canadian delegation led by Prime Minister W.L.M. King invoked the concept at the 1945 San Francisco Conference to justify Canada’s claims to participate in the post-war restructuring of the world and the establishment of the United Nations. - Zhukovskaya N.Yu. Middle Powers as an Element of the Modern World System: On the Theoretical Understanding of the Concept. // Tambov University Bulletin. Series: Humanities. - Tambov, 2018. - Vol. 23, Issue 1. - P. 172.

²The list does not include Brazil, Germany, India, Italy, and Japan, which, according to a number of authoritative scholars, belong to an intermediate group between great and middle powers due to their economic strength and international influence. At the same time, the list includes Taiwan, which is not officially recognized by many states of the world as an independent sovereign nation.

one hand, many middle powers are regional centers of power, but on the other hand, they differ in their geopolitical potential, have dissimilar economic development models and administrative-political systems, and have different ambitions at the regional and global levels.

While there are no universally accepted criteria for classifying this category of international actors, there are nevertheless some general criteria that can be used to distinguish them as a separate group of state actors. In our view, these are: a relatively average level of socio-economic development (economy size, level of technological development, resource and scientific potential, standard of living), demographic potential (population size, but more importantly, the quality of human capital), territorial dimension, military power, international influence, participation and weight in international organizations, including the regional ones.

However, these criteria show in a number of cases the relative nature of the boundaries between great powers and middle powers, especially those in the upper segment of the latter.

In particular, according to IMF estimates, in 2024 Germany (GDP – USD 4.59 trillion), Japan (USD 4.11 trillion), and India (USD 3.93 trillion) will surpass the United Kingdom (USD 3.49 trillion) and France (USD 3.13 trillion), while Brazil (USD 2.33 trillion), Italy (USD 2.32 trillion), and Canada (USD 2.24 trillion) will surpass Russia (USD 2.05 trillion) [2]. In other words, some middle powers are even ahead of the “great” ones in terms of economic development!

The same confusion can arise when comparing other identifiers: population size, territory, and international influence.

According to data from the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, India competes for first place in the world in terms of population (1.47 billion people) with China (1.48 billion), The United States ranks third (344.7 million), followed by Indonesia (292.9 million), Pakistan (246.8 million), Nigeria (237.1 million), and Brazil (223.2 million), significantly surpassing Russia (146.2 million), the United Kingdom (70.2 million), and France (66.9 million) [3, 4].

A similar picture emerges in terms of territory: Canada (9.98 million square kilometers) comes second only to Russia (17.1 million square kilometers), but surpasses the United States (9.83 million square kilometers) and China (9.59 million square kilometers). The top 10 also includes Brazil (8.51 million square kilometers), Australia (7.68 million square kilometers), India (3.28 million square kilometers), Argentina (2.78 million square kilometers), Kazakhstan (2.72 million square kilometers), and Algeria (2.38 million square kilometers) [5], which are usually considered medium-sized countries. On the other hand, Singapore, which is in the middle of the global hierarchy with an area of 734 square kilometers and a population of 6.5 million, is smaller than many small countries, such as Laos (area – 236,800 sq km, population – 7.9 million) or Tunisia (136,600 sq km, population – 12.5 million [3, 4, 5]).

As noted above, the geopolitical ambitions and international influence of Germany, Japan, and India have grown significantly, relying on their economic power and

claiming more significant positions in the world, in fact, promoting themselves to the ranks of “great powers.”

In this regard, it is evident that the boundaries between great and medium-power countries are becoming increasingly flexible, and the main difference between medium-power and great powers is the criterion of the scale of international behavior and ambitions which implies the regional and global status of the two categories of states. Accordingly, theoretically, the gradation of great and medium-sized states can only be made by taking into account all the criteria of their status.

Therefore, based on this premise, the following countries could hypothetically be classified as medium-power nations: Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Peru, and Chile in the Western Hemisphere; the EU countries, Norway, Switzerland, and Ukraine in Europe; Türkiye, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan (and, prospectively, Uzbekistan), Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, ASEAN countries (Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Philippines) in Asia; Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa in Africa; Australia and New Zealand.

The characteristic feature is that a significant number of these countries became middle powers at the end of the Cold War and globalization. This was the period when the world experienced an absolute increase in wealth and security, creating favorable conditions for the emergence of a relatively broad stratum of rapidly developing states. “The risk of great-power war seemed remote, multilateral cooperation flourished, democracy and human rights spread, and global poverty declined. The open, rules-based international order that emerged allowed the ‘pie’ of global prosperity to grow substantially,” noted the Munich Security Conference (MSC) Report 2024 [6, C. 9].

However, the tendency toward an increase in the number of middle powers may slow down today. According to the authors of the aforementioned MSC report, geopolitical rivalry and global economic uncertainty are intensifying, leading to the fragmentation of the international order, the economy, trade, and technology along geopolitical fault lines. Zero-sum thinking is becoming increasingly prevalent, and systemic contradictions between North and South are deepening with tangible damage to global cooperation. «Rather than reforming the open and rules-based international order so that it better delivers on its promised mutual benefits, the international community is currently moving in the opposite direction... There is thus a real risk that more and more countries end up in a lose-lose situation, which is no longer about who gains more, but only about who loses less» [6, C. 11]. It is quite obvious that this risk will primarily affect countries in the Global South that are striving to achieve a higher, or at least average, level of economic development and prosperity.

1.2. THE ROLE OF MIDDLE POWERS IN THE WORLD SYSTEM

Middle powers are playing an increasingly prominent role in international relations, influencing not only the global community’s agenda but also the behavior of major powers.

Today, middle powers are very active in discussions on UN reform, food and energy security, migration policy, the green transition, artificial intelligence, and regional cooperation. They are also actively involved in addressing global challenges, from promoting anti-nuclear initiatives to mediating the resolution of military conflicts.

For example, middle powers such as Austria, Australia, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Norway, Japan, and others played a key role in developing and promoting the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which was adopted in July 2017 at the UN headquarters in New York and entered into force in January 2021 after being ratified by 50 states.

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons provides for a complete ban on nuclear weapons, which may potentially equalize the status of current nuclear and non-nuclear powers. Provisions of the treaty, such as the obligation of participating states never to develop, acquire, or proliferate nuclear weapons, or to stockpile them, are aimed at promoting global stability and security, which are in the vital interests of most middle powers. Countries are prohibited from transferring nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices to anyone, from having control over such weapons, either directly or indirectly, and from using or threatening to use them. In addition, no country is allowed to place, install, or deploy any nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices on its territory or in any place under its jurisdiction or control.

Each State Party to the Treaty is obliged to “encourage States not party to the Treaty to sign, ratify, accept, approve, or accede to it, with the aim of achieving the universal adherence of all States to the Treaty”.

To date, the document has been signed by 95 countries and ratified by 74, including the vast majority of middle powers. Among the “refusers” are all nine nuclear-weapon states (in addition to the members of the UN “nuclear five”, also India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel), which justify their position by the need for nuclear deterrence against external threats.

The European Union, represented by a conglomerate of predominantly middle powers, is a leader in developments in the field of green transition, decarbonization, and environmental protection. As part of the European Green Deal, the EU has set a goal to become the world’s first climate-neutral continent by 2050.

Middle powers seek to make a critical contribution to the resolution of numerous conflicts around the world by offering their own solutions to problems, acting as mediators, and providing humanitarian aid.

The diplomatic record of the middle powers includes initiatives such as the Astana Process on Syria hosted by Kazakhstan, the Black Sea “grain deal” brokered by Türkiye, and the world’s largest negotiation platform on multiple international issues in neutral Switzerland. Among the world’s leading donors of humanitarian assistance through UN channels in 2023 were Germany (USD 1.551 billion), Japan (USD 686 million), Canada (USD 533 million), Norway (USD 441 million), and Sweden (USD 422 million). The contribution of the United States to humanitarian

aid programs amounted to USD 9.252 billion [7]. Furthermore, many middle powers actively participate in UN peacekeeping operations. As of 30 June 2024, a total of 48 middle-power countries had contributed their national forces to 12 ongoing peacekeeping missions [8].

All these examples show that medium-sized states are quite influential actors in world politics, promoting generally significant interests and issues.

The growing role of middle powers in the current stage of international development is connected with several factors.

First, the transition to a multipolar world has created a vacuum in terms of security and stability, which is now being filled by middle powers acting as “stabilizers” of the global order.

According to L. Nick, an expert at the Association for International Studies (USA), middle powers use their relative prosperity, management skills, and international prestige to maintain international order and peace. They help maintain order by forming coalitions, acting as mediators and “links,” and through activities to manage and resolve international conflicts, including peacekeeping operations [10, 11].

The World Economic Forum report “Shaping Cooperation in a Fragmenting World” also states that, “Throughout the history of multilateral institutions, so-called ‘middle powers’ have been the driving force behind innovation and have played a key role in preventing and de-escalating conflicts between great powers. Although until recently this term (middle powers) was applied only to Western countries, changes in the global balance of power mean that this function extends not only to the West, but also to other ‘emerging’ powers in the world” [11].

Secondly, under the conditions of global systemic rivalry, the importance of the alliance factor has increased. Middle powers are becoming a significant “counterweight on the scales” of international influence among major powers.

This factor is clearly illustrated by the example of the United States. The global leadership and superpower status of the United States are largely determined by the existence of its extensive network of allies. Washington maintains alliance relations of varying degrees and nature, ranging from military-political to economic, with nearly one-quarter of the world’s nations, far surpassing China and Russia in this regard. Consequently, the security guarantees and economic benefits derived from such alliances compel many countries, including those of middle-power status, to follow in the wake of American foreign policy.

Thirdly, given the decline of unipolarity, growing disruptions and negative reactions to globalization, and the fragmentation and restructuring of the global financial and political-economic system, the regional economic and political dynamics centered on middle powers will play an increasingly central role in international politics.

³In particular, this may refer to institutions such as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (since 1991 – the OSCE), and negotiation platforms between the USSR and the USA in Helsinki, Geneva, and Vienna.

This process is reflected in the trend toward greater regionalization through institutionalization (e.g., in Central Asia) and substantive content (SCO, GCC).

With the declining effectiveness of global institutions such as the UN, more and more countries are trying to solve their problems at the neighborhood level by joining regional security and cooperation structures. A recent example is the Kazakh President Tokayev's proposal to create a regional security architecture in Central Asia. At the same time, in some cases, middle powers themselves are becoming centers of power (Egypt, Türkiye, Iran, India) with gravitational pull on neighboring countries.

Fourth, the striving for independence by middle powers makes them a "third force" in relation to global competitors on the world stage.

In particular, the desire to play an independent role without siding with any of the global rivals was clearly demonstrated by the refusal of most middle powers of the Global South to join the West's anti-Russian sanctions. At the same time, these same states usually join resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine at UN General Assembly meetings.

The great powers are forced to take into account the position of middle powers, especially since the so-called small states often join the middle powers, thus creating international coalitions with a significant voice. Therefore, recognizing the positive role of middle powers in ensuring global geopolitical balance, the great powers agree that UN secretaries-general should be elected from among representatives of middle powers.

Fifth, middle powers are uniting in promoting the democratization of international relations, advocating for more equitable representation and equal participation in international organizations and institutions.

It is worth noting that the introduction of the principle of justice and equality into the world order as a universal norm of international relations, enshrined in the UN Charter and the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, is largely the result of the efforts of middle powers – at that time, primarily European ones. Continuing this tradition, today's middle powers are calling for further reform of the UN to make it more representative and give small and middle states greater rights to participate in global governance.

Sixth, the increased economic and innovation-technological potential of middle powers increases their weight in the global economy and trade.

Many researchers emphasize the expansion of the G7 (Group of Seven) to the G20 (Group of Twenty), considering it the most striking indicator of the growing role of middle powers in the world. The new format of cooperation is claimed to be the result of a realization that, in the face of the 2008 global financial crisis, it was necessary to turn to middle powers, including those in the Global South. Without their cooperation, global cooperation would be less effective and even difficult. In addition, it was taken into account that countries with emerging market economies were not adequately represented in global economic discussions and decision-making, which was perceived by the Global South as a violation of the fairness of the world order.

The involvement of new countries in global governance has, on the one hand, given

a powerful impetus to the development of global governance mechanisms and, on the other hand, significantly strengthened the influence of “middle-level” powers. The expansion of country membership, coupled with the establishment of the principle of equality among all G20 participants, has significantly strengthened the legitimacy of the platform itself in comparison with the G7 and any other multilateral institutions. Moreover, the formation of the G20 served to liberalize the general principles of trans-regionalism and increased the weight of “middle-level” powers in world politics, which subsequently began to claim a much more active role in international affairs [12].

Today, the G20 summits are a global forum for cooperation and consultation on issues related to the international financial and economic system. Collectively, the G20 represents 85% of global gross domestic product, 75% of global trade (including intra-EU trade), and two-thirds of the world’s population. The group includes 19 of the largest national economies, as well as the African Union and the European Union as collective participants [13].

Seventh, the role of middle powers in the global ecosystem for solving global problems such as climate change, poverty reduction, migration, terrorism and extremism, implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, etc., will grow.

Middle powers represent more than a quarter of the world’s countries, and their combined political and economic potential is a key factor in shaping the global response to global challenges.

Middle powers are playing an increasingly important role in representative international organizations, and regional structures are becoming more significant in global politics. The contribution of middle powers to solving global problems is receiving a positive response worldwide, and the unification of efforts by the international community under the influence of initiatives by middle powers is gaining momentum.

Eighth, there is a growing tendency for middle powers to become more active as promoters of their own civilizational and cultural code.

Mexico, Argentina, and Spain are successfully promoting Spanish-language music culture. The countries of the Organization of Turkic States are working closely together to revive Turkic culture, including through the creation of the Turkic Academy, the Nomadic Peoples’ Games, and various creative and cultural festivals. Leading Arab states are expanding measures to support and spread Islamic values around the world. Medium European countries are not falling behind in promoting their democratic and cultural values around the world, actively using soft power.

1.3. DIPLOMACY OF MIDDLE POWERS: STRATEGIES AND METHODS OF THEIR IMPLEMENTATION

German experts from the Science and Politics Foundation have identified three common features of the middle powers’ strategic approaches: the paramount importance of economic development, where issues of social and economic equality and global justice take center stage; a strong emphasis on stability and security, where international law and its liberal interpretation lose their interrelated power against

the backdrop of interests; the pursuit of strategic autonomy to ensure economic development and regime stability through flexible cooperation and a diversity of options aligned with national interests [14].

Middle powers use different strategies to achieve their goals on the international stage.

Researchers typically identify strategies such as “balancing” (between global actors) and “alignment” (with more powerful players). The difference between them is that in the first case, middle powers retain a certain degree of independence, being a party to the geopolitical balance, while in the second, they are forced to follow in the wake of the dominant state. In applying these strategies, the determining factor is the goal of ensuring national security, and the choice is conditioned by the degree of threats and the possibilities for their diplomatic neutralization. The higher the level of external military threat, the more preferable it seems to align oneself with another great power (e.g., Taiwan’s relationship with the US). In other cases, it seems advantageous to play the game of maintaining geopolitical balance, which provides opportunities to reap security dividends through reasonable diplomatic bargaining (e.g., Kazakhstan).

At the same time, analysis of international relations shows that neither balancing nor alignment exists in their pure form anymore. This is probably due to the fact that, from a strategic perspective, both of these strategies are risky and ineffective, since they lead to unilateral dependence on more powerful neighbors and limit the scope for diplomatic maneuvering. Even in the case of balancing, the need to take into account a whole range of external interests, sometimes mutually exclusive, complicates the independent foreign economic and foreign policy activities of a medium state. Therefore, the parallel use of balancing and alignment strategies by a medium state in relation to a great power is only possible if they are perceived not as mutually exclusive but, on the contrary, as complementary foreign policy measures.

In recent years, the concept of “hedging” has increasingly been used to explain the behavior of middle powers. This term refers to a set of strategies that simultaneously mitigate risks (risk-contingency options) and maximize returns (returns-maximizing options) in relations with major powers, while preserving broad room for foreign policy maneuvering. This strategy encompasses several key components, including dominance denial, indirect balancing, economic pragmatism, economic diversification, and limited bandwagoning. In practice, this approach manifests itself through a multi-vector foreign policy, which middle powers employ to shape and manage their international relations in a complex and evolving global environment [15].

As evidenced by these theoretical frameworks, all of the aforementioned strategies bear a Cold War–era imprint of inertia, reflecting varying degrees of dependence of middle-level states on great powers. In a certain sense, this dependence persists today, as one of the key factors shaping the behavior of middle powers on the global stage remains their limited capacity and resources for unilateral action.

However, there are other manifestations of this factor. On the one hand, it necessitates the development of multilateral frameworks to compensate for the deficit of individual state influence; on the other hand, it generates a need for participation in international organizations and the formation of coalitions and blocs with other countries. The consolidation of efforts within such coalitions and blocs enables middle-level powers to exert systemic influence on international political processes, including through the establishment of autonomous groupings of middle powers themselves.

In this context, there is a noticeable trend towards the formation of international cooperation projects where middle powers play an equal role with great powers (EU, BRICS+), or even manage without the latter's membership (ASEAN, MERCOSUR, IBSA, MIKTA) [16]. This is due to the fact that, in the new geopolitical conditions, regional powers have the opportunity to develop and implement their own multilateral institutions and (trans)regional projects, where the main determinants would be their own national interests rather than concerns of the bloc's solidarity.

Furthermore, (trans)regional cooperation, which inevitably involves building coalitions of like-minded countries, allows "middle-level" powers to resist traditional pressure from the world's leading powers much more effectively. The new thing here isn't so much the desire to maximize the middle powers' role in world politics, but the persistence and pressure to defend their right to fully participate in deciding and discussing global issues in world politics [12]. At the same time, the emerging multipolarity has significantly strengthened the leverage of middle powers, increasing their opportunities to choose partners in the international arena.

The position of middle powers in the existing world order is significantly influenced by the growing influence of regional power centers in world politics. Although middle powers that occupy or aspire to occupy leading positions in their regions do not have sufficient potential to provide an alternative to the world's leading powers, they nevertheless act as indispensable participants (and not just recipients) in political processes in the region. Moreover, it is now impossible to implement any projects at the regional level without taking into account the factor of regional power centers. For example, US plans to establish a truce between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip are based on the mediating role of Egypt and Qatar, while the Azerbaijani-Armenian peace talks imply the tacit "presence" of Türkiye.

Another factor that motivates some middle powers, predominantly authoritarian ones, to demand greater influence in international affairs is growing nationalism.

⁴Kuik C.C. The essence of hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's response to a rising China // *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*. 2008. Vol. 30. No. 2. P. 159–185.

⁵For example, the Foreign Policy Concept of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020–2030 states: The Republic of Kazakhstan implements its foreign policy based on the following fundamental principles: ... 4) multi-vector approach, pragmatism, and proactivity, which entail the development of friendly, equal, and mutually beneficial relations with all states, interstate associations, and international organizations that are of practical interest to Kazakhstan.

⁶ASEAN unites 10 countries in Southeast Asia and was established in 1967; MERCOSUR is a common market for South American countries (Venezuela's membership has been suspended since 2017) and was founded in 1991; IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa) was established in 2003, and MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Türkiye, Australia) in 2013.

Dissatisfied with their overall position within the existing systemic order, they seek to change it in favor of a new one where their role will be more significant. Such states link this transformation of the world order with the formation of new coalitions led by them (or where they hold leading positions, for example, in the Organization of Turkic States), or by joining other forces advocating a redistribution of roles in the world (BRICS+).

The international behavior of middle powers is characterized by a tendency to seek multilateral solutions to international problems and compromises in international disputes. This stems from the interest of middle powers in the security and stability of the world order, which forms the basis for their sustainable development. In this regard, according to President Tokayev, “in today’s world, marked by extreme geopolitical turbulence and constant conflicts, ... middle powers are key players with growing opportunities to ensure greater stability, peace, and development in their regions and beyond” [17]. Their determination to uphold and promote a multilateral approach as the guiding principle of international behavior, and their recognition of the value of global cooperation and collaboration in addressing global issues, play an important role in building a sustainable world order.

In this regard, Germany’s initiative to establish the Alliance for Multilateralism at the UN, founded in September 2019 by representatives of 50 countries, is indicative. At its first conference, the then German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said: «Despite all the crises we face, the rules-based world order has brought us more peace and prosperity than ever before in history. We must defend it» [18]. The alliance’s priorities include strengthening international law and human rights, disarmament, crisis prevention, climate change, combating pandemics, peacebuilding, and cybersecurity.

Middle powers are initiating several proposals to improve the existing world order. Their activity in this regard is quite logical, given that the great powers are hostages to their privileged position in the world (permanent membership in the UN Security Council, veto power, etc.) and therefore are not very interested in a systemic transformation of the world order. It is therefore noteworthy that the middle powers are proposing reforms that do not revolutionarily undermine the existing order, but rather evolve the status quo. In our view, this demonstrates the global responsibility of the middle powers, which advocate for the preservation of stability, security, and order based on rules and the supremacy of international law.

The diplomatic arsenal of middle powers includes both strategic alliances and situational coalitions. For example, Türkiye’s membership in NATO is a strategic component of its foreign policy, while at the same time, Ankara is part of the Syrian coalition with Russia and Iran, which are opposed to the West. Iran called for the formation of an anti-Israel coalition of countries, including all Muslim countries, in connection with the situation in the Gaza Strip, despite strategic differences with Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf countries.

The creation of alliances and coalitions by middle powers is not only a tool for increasing the influence of middle-level states in the international arena. It can also serve as a mechanism for achieving “strategic autonomy,” i.e., internal development goals, in particular, strengthening national security and sustainable socio-economic growth through the synergistic effect of (trans)regional cooperation.

A relevant example is the cooperation between Central Asian countries and MIKTA.

The Central Asian project is based on the joint efforts of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, two leading states that form the “core” of regional cooperation. The mutual attraction between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is based on geographical proximity, complementary economies, transit and transport capabilities, shared historical and cultural ties, religious views, and the mentality of the peoples. These same factors were also inherent in the other participants in the regional project, such as Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, which, along with the established principle of equal rights for participants, contributed to their voluntary accession to the cooperation agreement.

Over the past seven years, since the first Consultative Meeting of Heads of State of Central Asian Countries in 2018, the parties have made significant progress in achieving the goals of integration. The institutional framework for regional cooperation is steadily taking shape (Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia, Council of National Coordinators (on the affairs of the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia), regular meetings of the Secretaries of the Security Councils, ministerial-level meetings, the Central Asia Business Council, etc.). The international legal framework for cooperation is expanding (Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century, Concept of Interaction within Multilateral Formats, Concept of Regional Cooperation Development “Central Asia – 2040”, Roadmap for the Development of Regional Cooperation for 2025-2027, Action Plan for the Development of Industrial Cooperation for 2025-2027). Mechanisms to deepen mutually beneficial partnerships are being created (development of a network of trade, logistics, and industrial hubs in border areas, creation of joint ventures, mutual investments). Problems that previously hindered regional integration are being consistently addressed, such as border issues, customs barriers, access to domestic markets, distribution of water resources, etc.

“Today, relations between the five states have reached the level of deep strategic partnership and alliance, filled with concrete content in the political, trade, economic, cultural, and humanitarian spheres,” noted Kazakh leader K.K. Tokayev [19].

The results of this cooperation are evident: between 2018 and 2023, when regional cooperation processes were launched, the volume of mutual trade almost doubled, from USD 5.7 billion to USD 11 billion. By the end of 2023, internal trade in the region had grown by almost 25%. The World Bank and EBRD forecasts predict that the Central Asian economy will grow by an average of approximately 4.1-4.7% in 2024-2025 [20], with the possible increase to more than 5%.

In 2023, President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev raised the issue of forming a full-fledged regional identity, which was also supported by Kazakhstan. The next step towards self-sufficiency and enhancing the region's international standing appears to be President Tokayev's proposal to form an indivisible security space in Central Asia by creating the appropriate institutional architecture, cooperating in the field of defense policy, and actively interacting with the UN and other international and regional organizations in this area.

By demonstrating the strategy and behavior model characteristic of middle powers, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are solving the task of reviving Central Asia as one of the key geostrategic regions of Eurasia, which, according to Tokayev, could become a new epicenter of international geopolitical and geoeconomic transformations [19].

The MIKTA project has a transregional character and represents an attempt by "emerging" middle powers from different regions to create an institutional framework for joint intergovernmental initiatives.

Despite the geographical distance and dissimilar political and economic characteristics of the participating countries, MIKTA has demonstrated positive results in cooperation: the joint influence of MIKTA members in the G20 has grown, trade and economic partnership projects have been developed, and political and diplomatic dialogue on the joint promotion of MIKTA countries' interests in the international arena is intensifying.

MIKTA's influence is determined by both its political and economic potential and its demographic potential. Its member states represent 9% of the G20's economic potential, with a combined annual GDP of USD 7.7 trillion and foreign trade turnover of more than USD 3 trillion. More than 500 million people live in MIKTA member countries [21].

Given that MIKTA does not include any of the states represented in BRICS+ or IBSA, it can be viewed as an alternative or even a competitor to these groupings in the realm of international influence, serving as a unifying platform for the developing countries of the Global South and as an advocate of their collective interests within the G20 framework.

Thus, although integrative alternatives such as MIKTA may currently fall short of the influence and authority of blocs that include the world's leading powers, MIKTA nonetheless possesses substantial potential to emerge as an important actor on the global political stage.

An important distinction between MIKTA and other integration initiatives of "middle powers" lies in the fact that MIKTA is not a mechanical grouping of countries based on a few shared characteristics (as in the cases of the N-11 or MIST/MIKT groups), but rather an initiative aimed at establishing mechanisms for multilateral cooperation in the financial, economic, political, and diplomatic spheres.

For South Korea, MIKTA is intended to serve as a mechanism for enhancing its influence within international organizations; for Indonesia, it offers an opportunity to

broaden the scope of maneuver in its international and diplomatic activities; and for Türkiye and Mexico, it functions as an instrument for addressing economic challenges such as expanding foreign trade turnover and attracting foreign investment.

The unique political-diplomatic and trade-economic potential of MIKTA is based on the fact that its member states can be characterized as “core countries” of their respective regions, which, due to their geographical position, serve as “bridges” between different poles of the world.

Thus, Mexico in Latin America is a “core” power and a key economy for the region not only in terms of financial indicators, but also due to its proximity to the United States, its influence within USMCA (the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement, which replaced NAFTA in 2018), and its rapidly growing trade relations with the markets of Central and North America. Indonesia is the only Southeast Asian country that is a member of the G20, a strategically important regional power thanks to its economic growth over the past decade, its population size, its key role in ASEAN, and its success in building partnerships with leading global powers. South Korea is one of the most dynamically developing economies in Northeast Asia, a country aspiring to regional leadership and actively increasing its weight in the global economy. Türkiye is one of the “core” states of its region, possessing significant geopolitical and geostrategic potential that spans North Africa, the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia.

The geographical representation of MIKTA, combined with the influence of its members both at the regional level and within international organizations, enables them to serve as “bridges” in relations between various parts of the world: between the United States, Europe, and Western and Central Asia (Türkiye) [22]; between China and Japan (South Korea) [23]; between North and South America (Mexico); between the West and Southeast Asia (Indonesia) [24]; as well as among the Asia-Pacific states (Australia).

Moreover, owing to the geostrategic potential of its member states, MIKTA can serve as a “linking bridge” between the developed and developing countries within the G20, not only in a geographical sense, but also in socio-economic, political-diplomatic, and cultural-ideological dimensions.

Such mediating functions of MIKTA reflect another characteristic feature of “middle-level” powers – the need to possess considerable diplomatic tact and a deep understanding of the nature of the “fault lines” between different countries.

Speaking about the importance of this capacity of middle powers, the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, emphasized: “Being unburdened by the complexities of great-power politics, our flexibility allows us to successfully navigate complex diplomatic landscapes and to forge paths toward compromise and reconciliation. Even without possessing the same global influence as the world’s superpowers, countries like ours have the economic strength, military capabilities, and perhaps most importantly, the political will and diplomatic skill necessary to

exert significant influence on the global stage in areas such as food and energy security, the green transition and IT, as well as the resilience of supply chains” [17].

The distinction of transregional initiatives such as MIKTA lies in their outward-oriented rather than inward focus. They are inclusive, not self-contained, and at the same time project an international agenda of a global nature that corresponds to the interests of a wide range of states.

For example, MIKTA has opened up a number of new avenues of interstate cooperation on a broad spectrum of issues for its member countries, from global governance (such as UN reform and the functioning of the G20) and environmental protection to nuclear disarmament, human rights advocacy, migration, and cybersecurity.

As a transregional project, MIKTA has provided its member countries with the opportunity to build a unique network infrastructure for interaction with other countries on a bilateral, trilateral, or multilateral basis on a wide range of issues (so-called network diplomacy). In this case, the political, ideological, socio-economic, and geostrategic differences between MIKTA countries have created a complementary effect, facilitating rather than complicating the implementation of joint initiatives.

MIKTA also demonstrates an important feature of transregionalism among “middle-level” powers, namely the openness of such projects to new members. Although BRICS+ currently appears to have the edge in this regard, MIKTA still has a chance to expand its ranks.

In general, the union of “middle powers” within MIKTA demonstrates the possibility of a multiple increase in the influence of each individual country within this union, as it is now much more difficult to ignore, given its overall financial and economic potential and votes within other leading international organizations.

BRICS is another type of international cooperation format involving middle powers. Created in 2006 by four countries (two “great” powers and two “middle” powers) with the greatest potential for growth by 2050 at that time, BRICS expanded to 10 countries in 2024-2025, acquiring a new designation: BRICS+.

At the time of its establishment, the primary goal of the BRIC format was declared to be the expansion of trade, economic, and investment cooperation among its members in order to create more favorable conditions for domestic development based on their own potential. The project aimed to reduce dependence on the West, particularly in financial matters, and to create an alternative center of global governance within a multipolar world through the participation of major non-Western middle powers – Brazil and India. At the same time, the composition of the group,

⁷Before the accession of South Africa in 2010, the group was known as BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China).

⁸As of January 1, 2024, Egypt, Ethiopia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran became new members of BRICS, followed by Indonesia, which joined in January 2025.

selected on the basis of economic and political weight, reflected the elitist nature of the club and the specificity of its geopolitical ambitions.

Despite declarations emphasizing the purely economic nature of BRIC, the group initially contained a political dimension, implying an intention to enhance its role in global politics and the world economy through the globalization of its geographic scope. This is evidenced, in particular, by the invitation extended to South Africa, an influential African state, though far from equal to other members of the group in terms of economic potential (ranked 32nd in the world).

The guiding principles of BRICS, designed to shape a new niche in international relations as an alternative to the Western-centric mainstream, incorporate well-tested diplomatic practices. The first principle, expressed in the “spirit of BRICS,” proclaims mutual respect and understanding, equality, solidarity, openness, inclusiveness, and consensus. Other principles emphasize the need to strengthen multilateralism, promote institutional development, preserve identity, and enhance the role of non-Western countries in the international system, as well as to deepen cooperation among them, all of which align with the Global South’s middle-power vision of a new world order. Notably, the principle of equality among members, which rejects any privileged status and extends equally to new participants, reflects the consent of the two founding “great powers” to the middle powers’ aspirations for a more substantial role in global affairs. On the other hand, BRICS+ remains, by and large, an amorphous platform which is convenient for discussing various issues and for holding bilateral meetings on the sidelines of summits, yet the implementation of its decisions depends solely on the goodwill of its members. Consequently, the current BRICS+ agenda, which encompasses a wide range of issues aimed at promoting multilateral cooperation in the fields of security, post-pandemic economic recovery, technology exchange, and sustainable development, elicits a selective interest among middle powers.

The financial institutions and mechanisms of BRICS+, which contribute to reducing the dependence of developing countries on the dominant position of the West, attract particular attention from the middle powers of the Global South.

In particular, these include such initiatives as the New Development Bank (established in 2015 with a charter capital of USD 100 billion, contributed in equal shares by member states), the Contingent Reserve Arrangement, the BRICS payment system, the BRICS Joint Statistical Publication, and the BRICS reserve currency basket. At the same time, Anil Sooklal, South Africa’s Ambassador-at-Large for BRICS, emphasized that BRICS does not seek confrontation with any other blocs, including the G7, and that the group “aims to foster cooperation in order to build a more just and inclusive international architecture”.

Around 40 countries worldwide have expressed interest in cooperating with BRICS+ in one form or another, with approximately 20 states having formally applied for membership. The motivations of these applicants vary but generally

reflect a dual trend: first, disillusionment with the prospects of receiving assistance from the West and the World Bank under its control in the desired scope or on favorable terms (as in the cases of Argentina , Egypt, and Pakistan); and second, a desire to overcome international isolation and Western sanctions (as exemplified by Iran and Saudi Arabia).

According to Cobus van Staden, Senior Researcher at the South African Institute of International Affairs, the interest of developing countries in joining the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB) is driven by several key factors. First, the Global South has very limited options for development financing, particularly for concessional funding aimed at infrastructure development. This shortage has significantly contributed to the current debt crisis in the Global South, since the lack of concessional alternatives forces countries to borrow at market rates. Thus, the NDB provides these nations with an additional set of options, complementing traditional sources of development finance such as the World Bank. Second, a number of developing countries maintain complex relations with Western powers, primarily due to sanctions. For countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, the NDB represents a potential source of financing and influence beyond forums dominated by Western norms and conditionalities that are typically imposed alongside funding from institutions such as the World Bank .

Within the ongoing discussion on the expansion of the BRICS+ format, two approaches directly concerning middle powers have emerged. The first approach envisions that priority should be given to strengthening economic cooperation through the BRICS New Development Bank, allowing countries admitted to the Bank to participate in various group activities without formal accession to BRICS+.

The second approach considers another dimension: direct membership in the group with the status of permanent members (“BRICS + individual states”) and integration-based participation through alliances with other regional groupings (“BRICS + regional associations”).

The advancement of the “outreach” format, proposed by China in 2017, can be observed under both of the aforementioned scenarios. In particular, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt (now full members of BRICS+), and Bangladesh have joined the New Development Bank (NDB); meanwhile, the inclusion of new states, either all or part of those that have submitted applications into BRICS+, is currently under consideration. At the same time, under the “BRICS + regional associations” framework, the group is focused on cooperation with the Common Market of South America (MERCOSUR), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), in which BRICS members already wield significant influence. Moreover, in addition to cooperation with the African Union, the BRICS group maintains contacts with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), regarded as the first successful example of regional integration in Africa. BRICS experts also consider

promising the potential for collaboration along the lines of “BRICS + the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)”, which officially began operations on January 1, 2021.

It is assumed that in the future, this format may be expanded through cooperation with other regional integration blocs from Eurasia, such as the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council), ASEAN, and others.

The decision on the admission of new members will, in all likelihood, continue to be based on the same criteria applied to the current members of BRICS+. These include a high GDP and growth rate, a significant resource base, a large inflow of foreign investment and capital, a substantial share in global output and international trade, a notable economic and political role at the macro-regional level, and a commitment to reforming the rules of international economic cooperation. Additional indicators comprise human, industrial, and agricultural potential, as well as the presence of modern infrastructure. Equally important criteria for assessment within BRICS+ are an independent and self-sufficient approach to positioning on the global stage, a significant role in regional processes, and a willingness to contribute to the reform of the global governance system.

It is quite evident that these conditions apply exclusively to middle-power states, which attests to their growing influence on the global balance of power and, consequently, on the positions of the great powers.

Thus, there are three types of alliances and coalitions formed by middle powers:

- 1) Regional alliances, in which middle powers play a leading role, consolidating with smaller neighbors for the purposes of joint development and the strengthening of the region's strategic autonomy;

- 2) (Trans)regional alliances of equal middle powers, aimed at enhancing their collective influence in the international arena and deepening trade and economic relations through the use of network diplomacy;

- 3) Partnerships between middle powers and great powers, designed to increase their influence over the system of global governance and to contribute to the restructuring of the world order based on multilateralism and inclusivity.

Cooperation with middle powers is of great importance to great powers, thereby having a tangible impact on their political strategy.

Given the strengthening position of middle powers within the architecture of the modern world order, great powers are compelled to act with due regard to their material and political interests. This is reflected in the development and implementation of bilateral and multilateral dialogue formats, primarily concerning the regulation and redistribution of responsibilities within the global order [14].

The realities of today's world show that without the support of middle powers,

⁹Argentina withdrew from participation in BRICS after the coming to power of right-wing President Javier Milei in 2023.

¹⁰Saudi Arabia has expressed interest in BRICS, but has not yet submitted a formal application for membership.

¹¹Interview with Newsweek, June 9, 2023.

great powers will be unable to implement their global plans. At the same time, middle powers are gaining more leverage in choosing their partners and are becoming more assertive in their demands and aspirations. Realizing that the great powers rely on them for their global influence, the middle powers themselves are participating in the power struggle, wavering between cooperation and resistance in order to advance their own interests.

Indeed, it may be safely asserted that the era of great powers dictating their rules is irrevocably over. Therefore, they require a more flexible strategy to better adapt to the changing situation in a polycentric environment.

In this regard, the strategies of great powers are aimed both at the formation of broad alliance networks and at the engagement of key regional actors in the implementation of their agendas. Within the framework of the multilateral approach adopted by great powers, a characteristic feature of their behavior is a pronounced transactionalism, i.e., the political integration of security communities based on their communicative interaction.

In the competition for the loyalty of middle powers, great powers are compelled to demonstrate flexibility by offering cooperation in specific areas. For instance, in matters of security in the Indo-Pacific region, the United States and the United Kingdom established a pact with Australia (AUKUS), while the United States formed the Quadrilateral Dialogue (QUAD) with India, Australia, and Japan. In turn, recognizing its existing contradictions with the Southeast Asian countries, China promotes economic cooperation with them, particularly through the framework of the “Community of Shared Future in the Lancang-Mekong River Basin”, which includes China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand.

The influence of middle powers on the behavior of global players is also reflected in the fact that the latter must make certain concessions in order not to lose the goodwill of their middle-power partners. This is particularly evident in the economic sphere, as middle powers constitute a significant segment of global trade and resource supply. For example, the United States provides benefits and trade preferences to Mexico (in the automotive industry) and Canada (in dairy products); France was among the main donors supporting the EU’s post-pandemic economic recovery; and China has been extending unprecedented large-scale lending to foreign states under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Thus, the general direction of global development is strengthening the position of middle powers in the architecture of the international order. Similar to the political role of the middle class, this brings stability and contributes to the strengthening of democratic principles in international relations.

1.4. “WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY” FOR MIDDLE POWERS

The growing number of middle powers and their expanding potential in the political, economic, technological, and diplomatic spheres open up new opportunities for them to contribute to global development.

Among these prospects is the initiation of new informal alliances, the purpose of which could be cooperation between different countries in addressing pressing international issues.

According to A.A. Rakhmetullin, former First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “It is important to understand not only the potential of individual middle powers but also the potential of this group of countries as a whole. If each country acts independently, we will not achieve the desired effect. But if we combine our efforts, we can create a kind of synergistic effect. This allows a group of countries to be proactive and, to some extent, to complement international relations by adding value to collective efforts” [25].

Among the most recent examples of such an initiative is the establishment of the “Friends of Peace” Club, launched on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September 2024 at the initiative of China, in cooperation with Brazil. The project was supported by Algeria, Bolivia, Hungary, Egypt, Zambia, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Colombia, Mexico, Türkiye, and South Africa, most of which represent middle powers. France and Switzerland also attended the group’s first meeting. The countries that joined the club are primarily focused on developing a formula to end the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, and, in the longer term, on shaping a concept to prevent future wars and to create conditions for the peaceful coexistence of all states.

Given the urgency of the “Friends of Peace” agenda for global peace and security, experts suggest that the club is likely to expand its membership in the future, primarily with representatives of the Global South not engaged in conflicts on either side. It is evident that the “Friends of Peace” initiative will also gain the support of many middle powers committed to strengthening stability and security in international relations.

Noteworthy is the proposal made by Zhang Ning, Deputy Director of the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) Center and Head of the Central Asia Department at the Institute for Development of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, during the Astana Think Tank Forum held on October 16–17, 2024 in Kazakhstan, on the theme “Middle Powers in a Transforming World Order”. According to him, “The COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict have further deepened the development gap and increased uncertainty in international affairs. Against this backdrop, the role of middle powers stands out. The establishment of a consortium (alliance) of such states as an independent ‘intermediate’ zone between developed and developing countries would remove dividing lines within the international multilateral mechanism, allowing them to play the role of a third force, since middle powers have significant influence in their respective regions and can consolidate resources for regional development and integration” [26].

Middle powers make a significant contribution to addressing global social challenges such as poverty, hunger, illegal migration, drug trafficking, and organized crime. The sphere of important initiatives includes measures aimed at advancing education, ensuring gender equality, protecting women and children from violence,

improving healthcare in low-income countries, and expanding access to social goods, including clean water, electricity, communication, and the Internet. Many of the new middle powers, having only recently emerged from poverty themselves, feel a moral responsibility toward developing nations and therefore embrace the principles of development assistance. This sense of solidarity may serve as a foundation for forming new alliances of middle powers, whether regional or global in relevant areas. Beyond altruism, such efforts also carry a pragmatic dimension, as assisting developing countries helps to strengthen global security and stability, improve the world's economic situation, and ultimately enhance the influence of middle powers within the Global South, and, consequently, in the international system as a whole.

It is worth noting that the emergence of new alliances of middle powers, for instance, in the interests of developing trade or scientific and technological cooperation, is most likely to occur within the framework of interregional partnerships. With regard to the Central Asian region, potential formats could include “C5+ASEAN”, “C5+MERCOSUR”, “C5+GCC”, and others. The motivation for creating such interregional groupings lies either in the synergistic effect of cooperation among middle powers of roughly equal potential, particularly in mutual trade, joint scientific research, and technological innovation, or in their complementarity, that is, the mutual compatibility of their economies, which contributes to the sustainable development of the participating countries.

Expert meetings and forums, such as the Astana Think Tank Forum, can help identify the necessary methods and forms of interaction in this area.

New “windows of opportunity” for middle powers are opened by their high scientific and technological potential. In the past, Japan, South Korea, and several Southeast Asian countries demonstrated remarkable examples of breakthrough development, becoming world leaders in automobile manufacturing, shipbuilding, and electronics. In the field of mobile communications, Ericsson (Sweden) and Nokia (Finland) once enjoyed global popularity, while Samsung (South Korea) continues to hold a significant share of the global smartphone market. Taiwan is the world's largest producer of semiconductors, accounting for 60% of global semiconductor output and over 90% of the production of the most advanced chips [27], while the Dutch company ASML remains the sole manufacturer of cutting-edge lithography equipment for the microelectronics industry. India ranks among the leading space powers and is also recognized as one of the world's main suppliers of software specialists.

In this regard, it is noteworthy that in the 2024 ranking of the world's top 10 most technologically advanced countries, the majority of leading positions are occupied by middle powers. Specifically, Japan and South Korea rank first and second, followed by the United States, Germany, China, Singapore, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and Finland [28]. Today, these nations play a leading role in shaping the technological future of the world.

Accordingly, being at the forefront of science and technology, middle powers are

capable of independently or in cooperation implementing breakthrough projects in the future. Among the promising areas pursued by companies and research centers of middle powers are artificial intelligence, biotechnology, genetic engineering, pharmaceuticals, new energy sources (including renewables and nuclear fusion), as well as medical and space technologies.

Central Asian states are also taking part in this process. In particular, Kazakhstan has operated the International Center for Green Technologies and Investment Projects since 2018 and is working to establish a National Center for Artificial Intelligence. Since July 2024, Kazakhstan has been implementing the Artificial Intelligence Development Concept for 2024–2029, which envisions the deployment of a supercomputer, the construction of data processing centers, the creation of a national AI platform, and the expansion of fiber-optic communication networks. In Uzbekistan, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev instructed the establishment of an Artificial Intelligence Technology Center in August 2024.

Since 1993, the National Center for Biotechnology of the Republic of Kazakhstan has been conducting scientific research and development in the fields of biotechnology, molecular biology, genetics, biochemistry, microbiology, virology, immunology, and pharmacology. The high potential of Kazakhstani scientists is evidenced by the creation of the QazCovid-in vaccine against COVID-19 in 2020. At that time, similar developments existed only in the United States, Germany, Russia, and China.

Scientific research possesses a transformative power, and middle powers can exert significant global influence through joint scientific initiatives. Such cooperation would not only lead to the implementation of valuable research projects but also promote the exchange of resources, technologies, and knowledge among countries that have historically been underrepresented in global scientific endeavors.

For instance, a concept of potential scientific and commercial interest could be the creation of an interstate Turkic Aerospace Agency within the framework of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), aimed at developing and implementing aerospace projects in cooperation with the world's leading space powers.

Another important area of cooperation among middle powers is the promotion of mutually beneficial collaboration in technology transfer. Instead of engaging in zero-sum competition, middle powers tend to pursue joint solutions and collective efforts that create win-win outcomes, ensuring shared benefits from international partnerships.

Taking the cooperation between South Korea and Vietnam as an example, over the past decade, these two middle powers have developed close economic ties, with South Korean companies investing heavily in Vietnam's manufacturing sector.

¹²In particular, this idea was proposed at the Astana Think Tank Forum, held on October 16–17, 2024, in Kazakhstan, under the theme “Middle Powers in a Transforming World Order.”

Hyundai has invested USD 415 million in Vietnam, employing 2,300 workers, with an estimated revenue of USD 2.6 billion in 2023 [29]. This relationship has been mutually beneficial, as Vietnam's economy has grown rapidly and South Korea has gained access to a stable and affordable manufacturing base.

In the context of global political and economic fragmentation and a crisis of trust among great powers, there is a growing public demand for forms of cooperation that help reduce international tensions. This creates favorable prospects for the expansion of cooperation among middle powers, which, due to their foreign policy behavior, act as active facilitators and connecting bridges in the sphere of public diplomacy and the cultural-humanitarian dimension. Their advantages lie in the absence of hegemonic ambitions or attempts to impose their ideological or religious views, combined with a commitment to cultural identity and multilateralism. These qualities provide a constructive foundation for meaningful cultural exchange and development. Rather than focusing on hard power, middle powers can enhance their international influence through soft power, exercised via cultural diplomacy and the promotion of mutual respect for national identity.

One of the most successful and enduring examples of cooperation built on these principles is Nordic cooperation. The five countries of Northern Europe: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden share a deep cultural and historical bond, while each nation maintains its own distinct national identity. This balance between shared values and respect for national differences constitutes a key principle of Nordic cooperation, implemented through the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers [30].

Such alliances formed by middle powers illustrate that partnership based on mutual cultural respect and common strategic goals can generate sustainable, mutually beneficial results for all stakeholders involved.

Middle powers can offer their partners educational services that meet global standards. A vivid reflection of the growing international cooperation in this field is the steady increase in the share of foreign students studying at leading universities in Europe, Canada, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong. For instance, international students constitute 43% of the student body at ETH Zurich (Switzerland, ranked 11th globally), 27% at the University of Toronto (Canada, ranked 21st), 39% at the Technical University of Munich (Germany, ranked 30th), 27% at Nanyang Technological University (Singapore, ranked 32nd), and 64% at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (Switzerland, ranked 33rd) [31]. Recognizing education as one of the key drivers of human capital development, a cornerstone of modern progress, Kazakhstan has initiated the establishment of 27 branch campuses of foreign universities from Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, South Korea, Poland, Italy, Ireland, China, and Uzbekistan [32]. Similar measures in the field of higher education are being undertaken by Uzbekistan.

Digital education is another area where middle powers have a chance for global

success. Countries such as India and South Korea have become leaders in the creation of online education platforms. Their extensive experience in this field could be used to cooperate with other middle powers in order to expand access to quality education in regions where traditional education is difficult due to geographical, economic, or political barriers. Joint ventures in educational technology (edtech) would not only support education in low-income countries but also strengthen the global competitiveness of middle powers in this growing industry.

Cooperation among middle powers in the field of medicine and global health has serious potential, where they can play a systemic role by collaborating on research, development, and dissemination of medical innovations. Middle powers can form partnerships focused on global health initiatives, particularly in the context of pandemic preparedness, vaccine accessibility, and equitable distribution, and the fight against non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and heart disease, which disproportionately affect developing countries. For example, India, as a major producer of generic drugs, is in a position to supply many vital medicines to countries with not only middle but also low incomes.

Cultural and historical achievements of middle-income countries are attracting considerable interest worldwide, which, among other factors, creates opportunities for expanding tourism activities.

Tourism as an economic phenomenon of our time plays a big role in the GDP of many countries, ensures employment, promotes the introduction of new technologies, and stimulates the global market for goods and services. Tourism impacts transportation, communications, and construction, enables the development of small and medium-sized businesses, contributes to increased exports, and serves as a significant source of income for those employed in the sector, as well as a source of revenue for local and national budgets. It is widely believed that the importance of tourism as part of the national economy will only increase in the near future.

In addition, tourism contributes to the expansion of integration ties between countries and regions, which is reflected in the formation of new cultural, scientific, technical, and trade relationships. International tourism is also important because it gradually transfers capital from countries with high economic levels to developing countries. Globally, this means that developing regions receive a stimulus, an injection into the economy, and additional funds for development.

Overall, the tourism industry provides more than 320 million jobs worldwide. According to estimates by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), twice as many people work in the travel sector of the economy as in the financial services sector.

According to the World Tourism Barometer of the United Nations Tourism Organization (formerly UNWTO), approximately 790 million tourists traveled abroad during the first seven months of 2024, which is an increase of about 11% compared to 2023 and only 4% below the level recorded in 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic [33].

There is a fairly large segment of medium-sized countries that could increase tourist flows with appropriate cooperation and development programs. In particular, significant potential exists in such popular destinations as Mexico, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, the Czech Republic, Egypt, Türkiye, the UAE, Thailand, South Korea, Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore.

In Central Asia, the development of tourism along the Great Silk Road is a project of regional significance. A Central Asian “Schengen” agreement is currently being negotiated, which will allow tourists to visit cities and sites along the Great Silk Road in a single trip. An integrated package of tourist services across all countries visited is being developed, and the necessary hotel and transport infrastructure is under development.

By taking advantage of existing and potential future “windows of opportunity,” middle powers can further strengthen their stabilizing and developmental role in the world.

II KAZAKHSTAN AS A MIDDLE POWER: ITS CONTRIBUTION TO GLOBAL DIPLOMACY

2.1. KAZAKHSTAN IS A MIDDLE POWER

The inclusion of Kazakhstan in the list of middle powers by German experts in January 2024 did not come as a surprise. International scholars who have closely followed the country's evolution since independence have long recognized that Kazakhstan's potential would enable it to reach this level in the near future. The country itself had also clearly articulated its aspiration to become a middle power in the global hierarchy as early as 2012, when the Kazakhstan-2050 Strategy set the ambitious goal of joining the world's thirty most developed nations by 2050.

Nevertheless, Kazakhstan's self-positioning as a middle power was formalized in 2020, when the Foreign Policy Concept of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020-2030 officially defined the nation's status as "a middle regional state" [16].

What are the grounds for classifying Kazakhstan as belonging to this category of states?

The German expert on Kazakhstan and Central Asia, Andrea Schmitz, highlights the following aspects. First, the geographical extent and territory: Kazakhstan is the largest landlocked state in Eurasia, whose position at the junction with Russia and China makes it an important geostrategic element in the policies of these countries. For them, Kazakhstan is of great interest as a supplier of raw materials, a sales market, and a transport corridor, as well as a political ally and a space from which potential security threats may originate, requiring political and military countermeasures. Second, Kazakhstan possesses enormous resource potential, which is also of interest to the United States and Europe, including in the field of green energy production. Third, the advancement of "liberal principles" in Kazakhstan compared to the surrounding countries. Fourth, Kazakhstan's foreign policy profile stands out, making it a key actor in the region.

Schmitz notes the features typical of the international behavior of middle powers that are inherent in Kazakhstan's foreign policy. These are, first and foremost, the multi-vector approach, which makes it possible to maintain a geopolitical balance to ensure national security, gain benefits from multilateral economic cooperation, strengthen sovereignty, and enhance the country's international role as a bridge between Asia and Europe. The country is committed to a multilateral approach in international relations, which is reflected in its active participation in multilateral organizations at both the global and regional levels. Kazakhstan also acts as a reliable partner in the international arena, being "ready to take responsibility where there is a demand for diplomatic skill" [14].

Similar characteristics are given to Kazakhstan by the American political scientist Janusz Bugajski. According to him, Kazakhstan is “the largest state in Central Asia, both in size and in economic terms,” possessing significant “potential as a supplier of energy resources and as a transit hub for Euro-Asian trade” [34].

By classifying Kazakhstan as a middle power, the overseas scholar notes the factors that enable the country to strengthen its international role. He writes: “By taking advantage of its strategic location, growing economy, and rich natural resources, Kazakhstan is increasingly becoming an important player on the Eurasian stage. Its role as a bridge between East and West allows it to influence regional cooperation and economic integration. By developing diplomatic relations with both Western and Eastern powers, Kazakhstan positions itself as a key mediator and economic partner in Eurasia.

As a middle power, Kazakhstan astutely balances its relations with major powers such as Russia and China, acting as a stabilizing force in the region” [34].

At the same time, Kazakhstan holds strategic importance for the West, representing a regional center of power.

Ultimately, the author concludes that Kazakhstan’s role as a middle power, combined with its political reforms, makes it a constructive and evolving player in Eurasian affairs. In this regard, Bugajski calls on the West to deepen engagement and strategic partnership with Kazakhstan in order to have a reliable and stable partner in the region.

Kazakhstan’s new status as a middle-level state is also recognized in Russia: in February 2024, Nezavisimaya Gazeta published an article with the corresponding title, “The Inclusion of Kazakhstan in the List of the World’s Middle Powers Is a Statement of Fact” [35]. In it, the author confirmed the validity of the conclusions made by the German Foundation for Science and Politics, which classified Kazakhstan among the middle powers.

Undoubtedly, Kazakhstan’s emergence as a middle power was not accidental – it was the result of a well-calibrated state policy aimed at utilizing all the advantages and vast potential of the country to ensure its comprehensive and dynamic development and to strengthen its international standing.

As of today, the national indicators that make it possible to classify Kazakhstan as a middle power are as follows:

The territory is 2,724,902 square kilometers (ninth largest in the world). In the north and west, the republic shares a border with Russia: 7,591 km (the longest continuous land border in the world), in the east with China: 1,783 km, in the south with Kyrgyzstan: 1,242 km, Uzbekistan: 2,351 km, and Turkmenistan: 426 km. The total length of land borders is 13,200 km.

The population is 20,139,914 (June 1, 2024, 62nd in the world).

According to the World Bank, GDP (nominal) in 2024 amounted to USD 288.41 billion (0.27% of global GDP) [36]. In turn, the IMF estimated GDP at purchasing

power parity (PPP) at USD 693.415 billion, GDP per capita at USD 15,760 (nominal), and at PPP at USD 34,534 [37].

The country possesses a solid industrial base, primarily in the mining sectors, a stable banking and financial system, and a developed agro-industrial sector (production of grain, cereals, flour, and vegetable oil).

Attracting foreign investment contributes to raising the technological level of production. According to data from the National Bank of Kazakhstan, the gross inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI) into the Kazakh economy from 2013 to 2023 amounted to approximately USD 246.9 billion, of which USD 102.5 billion was in the mining industry (including USD 83.7 billion in the oil and gas sector). At the same time, in 2021-2023 alone, the gross inflow of FDI into Kazakhstan exceeded USD 75 billion: USD 23.8 billion in 2021, USD 28 billion in 2022 [38], and USD 23.4 billion in 2023 [39]. According to the National Development Plan of the Republic of Kazakhstan, it is planned to attract another USD 150 billion in foreign investment by 2029 [39].

At the regional level, Kazakhstan accounts for 70% of foreign investment in Central Asia.

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Kazakhstan's economy has undergone a long period of sustained growth over the past few decades, with a steady increase in GDP per capita. This has contributed to improving the socio-economic living conditions of the country's citizens, reducing poverty, and increasing market activity. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Kazakhstan ranked 67th out of 193 countries in the 2023/2024 Human Development Index (HDI) with a score of 0.802, placing it in the group of countries with a high HDI. Budget expenditures on science, education, and healthcare in 2024 amounted to 217.2 billion tenge (USD 461 million), 1.643 trillion tenge (USD 3.57 billion), and 2.38 trillion tenge (USD 5.17 billion), respectively [40].

It is also worth noting the country's significant resource potential, which enables Kazakhstan to hold a position as one of the major players in the global raw materials market.

In particular, Kazakhstan ranks first among the CIS countries in terms of mineral reserves of chromium ore and lead, second in terms of oil, silver, copper, manganese, zinc, nickel, and phosphate reserves, and third in terms of gas, coal, gold, and tin reserves. In terms of non-metallic minerals, Kazakhstan has world-class reserves of uranium, asbestos, and phosphorites.

Proven coal reserves in the country exceed 33 billion tons, accounting for 2.2% of global reserves.

Proven oil reserves in the country's subsoil amount to 6.5 billion tons (12th place in the world). In addition, the projected oil reserves of the Kazakh sector of the Caspian Sea are estimated at another 17 billion tons. Proven gas reserves are

estimated at 2.7 billion tons, which accounts for 1.5% of global reserves.

The country's iron ore reserves amount to 16.6 billion tons, which, according to the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), accounts for 10% of global reserves (8th place in the world).

The country ranks third in the world in terms of copper ore reserves (UNECE) and sixth in terms of production. Kazakhstan is one of the world's largest producers and exporters of refined copper.

According to UNECE estimates, proven uranium reserves account for 25% of global reserves (second in the world after Australia). The country's uranium industry produces about 40% of the world's uranium and occupies a leading position in this field: in 2023, production amounted to 21.1 thousand tons.

Kazakhstan's chromium reserves are among the world's largest, estimated at 230 million tons. Moreover, Kazakhstan's chromite ore is renowned for being of the highest quality. The country is one of the world's top three leaders in chromite production, with over 4 million tons per year.

Kazakhstan ranks 15th in the world in terms of gold reserves and gold production (81.9 tons in 2023), according to UNECE data [41].

Regarding its military capacity, Kazakhstan ranks 58th in the world in terms of Armed Forces strength, according to Global Firepower [42].

2.2. KAZAKHSTAN'S CONTRIBUTION TO ADDRESSING GLOBAL CHALLENGES

The most important distinctive feature of Kazakhstan as a middle power is its international behavior, which characterizes it as a "good citizen" of the world.

In this regard, the primary priority of the foreign policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan is to ensure peace and security at the global and regional levels, including as a condition for the existence and stable development of Kazakhstan's sovereign statehood.

Realizing that the achievement of this goal is possible only through the de-escalation of international tensions, especially among the great powers, Kazakhstan directs its efforts toward promoting the restoration and strengthening of an atmosphere of trust in international relations, based on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations. Astana advocates the maintenance of a world order transforming toward greater justice and equality, taking into account the interests of all countries and regions, and encouraging compromise-oriented behavior among members of the international community. The call to rid the world of the threat of war as such and to eliminate its causes remains highly relevant [43].

Along this track, Kazakhstan, using its capacities and potential as a middle

¹³Based on the National Bank of Kazakhstan's average weighted exchange rate for 2024, 1 US dollar is equivalent to 460 tenge.

power, has promoted these ideas both in a bilateral format and through multilateral cooperation. In particular, Astana conducts regular consultations with the leadership of the world's major powers, puts forward initiatives aimed at strengthening global peace and security, and takes an active part in the work of international organizations as well as in global and regional cooperation forums.

Kazakhstan's efforts to promote the idea of a world free of nuclear weapons have gained wide recognition and international acclaim. The country's actions and initiatives in this field include: the closure of the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site in 1991; the renunciation of the nuclear arsenal inherited from the USSR (1,216 nuclear warheads); the dismantling of the missile silo infrastructure for nuclear delivery systems (148 missile silos); the transfer of 600 kilograms of highly enriched uranium to the United States (Operation Sapphire, 1994); the ratification of international treaties, the NPT (1993), the CTBT (1996), and the TPNW (2019); and the establishment of a Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in 2006. The issue of nuclear disarmament was the central item on Kazakhstan's agenda as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (2017–2019).

In 2012, Kazakhstan initiated the ATOM Project (Abolish Testing. Our Mission), an international educational and awareness campaign aimed at encouraging the global public to speak out against nuclear weapons testing and, ultimately, against nuclear weapons themselves. Among Kazakhstan's diplomatic achievements is also the initiative, co-authored with a number of countries, to develop the universal Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which entered into force in 2021.

These measures of Kazakhstan's peace-oriented foreign policy have enabled the country to establish itself as a leader of the global anti-nuclear movement and have strengthened its international influence.

At the current stage, according to the Head of State, the main priority for the international community should be the restoration of a reliable global security architecture, including in the nuclear sphere.

“We advocate the resumption of high-level dialogue among nuclear powers and the intensification of multilateral actions aimed at significantly reducing the threat of the use of nuclear weapons. Kazakhstan is ready to host a new dialogue on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. We can focus on informal, comprehensive discussions that will strengthen the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and ensure progress in the implementation of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT),” he stated in his address at the 80th session of the United Nations in September 2025 [44].

Another area of Kazakhstan's international cooperation in the field of nuclear non-proliferation is its interaction with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which has been ongoing since 1994. Having become, de facto, a nuclear state after the dissolution of the USSR, Kazakhstan was highly interested in cooperating with the IAEA to develop its own and joint programs in the field of peaceful nuclear energy.

The cornerstone of relations between the parties is the Agreement between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the IAEA on the Application of Safeguards in Connection with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

In accordance with the Safeguards Agreement, all nuclear activities in Kazakhstan are placed under the IAEA's safeguards.

As a member state of the IAEA, Kazakhstan has also ratified its participation in the Convention on Nuclear Safety, the Joint Convention on the Safety of Spent Fuel Management and on the Safety of Radioactive Waste Management, the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material, the Convention on Early Notification of a Nuclear Accident, the Convention on Assistance in the Case of a Nuclear Accident or Radiological Emergency, and the Vienna Convention on Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage.

To develop cooperation with the IAEA, in 2015 the country signed an agreement with it to establish a Low Enriched Uranium Bank (LEU Bank) in Kazakhstan. This project aims to ensure guaranteed supplies of nuclear fuel to various countries in the event of destabilization of the open market or disruption of other existing mechanisms for supplying LEU [45]. The document stipulates strict compliance by the host country with IAEA requirements, which guarantees the exclusively peaceful nature of the nuclear fuel used.

Thus, the selection of Kazakhstan as the depository of the LEU, which is under the control of the IAEA, confirms the international community's trust in the country as a reliable and responsible international partner acting for the benefit of all states in accordance with its commitments.

At present, within the framework of the technical cooperation program with the IAEA, Kazakhstan is implementing 63 projects (11 national, 46 regional, and 6 interregional) aimed at introducing modern nuclear technologies in medicine (cancer treatment), agriculture (increasing crop yields, water purification, food security), the conversion of lands of the former Semipalatinsk test site to economic use, and other areas [46]. The IAEA also serves as the main consultant to Kazakhstan on the development of nuclear energy and the planned construction of a nuclear power plant.

In addition to its ongoing work in the field of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, Kazakhstan is actively promoting the establishment of a new multilateral body under the auspices of the United Nations, focused on biosafety, with the aim of preventing the devastating consequences of artificial pandemics and bioterrorism on a global scale [17].

Kazakhstan considers the new arms race unfolding against the backdrop of global rivalry between world powers as a growing threat to peace and security. Countries

¹⁴In addition to the Soviet nuclear arsenal, Kazakhstan possessed nuclear technologies (the production of nuclear fuel pellets for reactors) and nuclear facilities, including the BN-350 nuclear reactor in Aktau, a small nuclear reactor at the Institute of Nuclear Physics in Almaty, and two nuclear reactors in Kurchatov.

in the Global South are also being drawn into this race, forced to take into account the risks of a divided world and therefore increase their defense capabilities. The SIPRI report *Trends in World Military Expenditure for 2024* states that spending has been growing for the ninth consecutive year, and that in 2023, for the first time since 2009, spending increased in all five geographical regions identified by the Swedish institute (the most notable growth was in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia and Oceania). The five countries that spent the most on their armed forces in 2023 were the United States, China, Russia, India, and Saudi Arabia [47]. In this regard, Astana advocates preventing an arms race, including in space.

The danger of international terrorism and extremism, which pose a radical threat to peace and stability on the planet, remains. To counter this evil, Kazakhstan proposes to unite the efforts of all states by creating a broad international anti-terrorism coalition based on the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. Adopted in 2006 by consensus of the UN member states, the Strategy includes a wide range of measures, from strengthening the capacity of states to counter terrorist threats to improving the coordination of counter-terrorism activities within the United Nations system [48]. Kazakhstan considers the elimination of the causes contributing to the emergence and spread of terrorism and extremism, namely poverty, social injustice, discrimination against human rights and freedoms, and the violation of cultural and religious traditions, to be an important condition for the effectiveness of the fight against terrorism and extremism.

Kazakhstan recognizes climate change caused by global warming as a result of human activity as an existential threat to humanity. Supporting international efforts in this area, the country has acceded to the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Climate Agreement, setting itself the goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2060.

Within the framework of its co-chairmanship with France, Kazakhstan made a valuable contribution to the holding of the first One Water Summit in 2024, the purpose of which is to unite countries and communities around the world facing problems of water scarcity and desertification.

Kazakhstan's initiative to establish the Islamic Organization for Food Security (IOFS), supported by all member states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), became a response to the challenges and negative consequences of climate change. The main tasks of the new intergovernmental organization, established in Astana in 2011, include: providing member states with assistance in various aspects of sustainable agriculture, rural development, and food security; creating food reserves and providing necessary humanitarian assistance in the event of threats to food security in member countries; addressing problems related to desertification, deforestation, soil and water erosion and salinization; and coordinating a common agricultural policy, including the mobilization and management of financial and agricultural resources for the development of agriculture and the improvement of food security in member states. Today, the IOFS, headquartered in Astana, includes 42 member states.

Kazakhstan actively participates in the activities of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, established in 1993 by five Central Asian states to implement projects aimed at addressing the environmental crisis caused by the drying up of this water body.

To coordinate regional efforts in combating the consequences of climate change, Astana also proposed the establishment of a new United Nations Regional Center for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for Central Asia and Afghanistan, to be located in the city of Almaty (Kazakhstan). The opening of the office of this structure in the “southern capital” in April 2025 became an important achievement of Kazakhstan’s diplomacy. In 2026, it is also planned to hold a Regional Climate Summit under the auspices of the United Nations in Kazakhstan.

The country’s commitment to peace is reflected in its practical actions. Since autumn 2018, the Kazakh peacekeeping contingent, including military observers and staff officers, has been participating in the UN Interim Force in Lebanon. Up to 430 Kazakhstani military personnel will carry out peacekeeping tasks in UN peacekeeping operations in the Middle East and Africa, in particular by participating in the following UN missions: United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF, Syria-Israel), United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO, Palestine-Israel), United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS, South Sudan), United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA, Sudan) Since the autumn of 2018, the Kazakh peacekeeping contingent, including military observers and staff officers, has been participating in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) mission [49, 50].

The Kazakh military has also participated in UN missions in Côte d’Ivoire, Western Sahara, the Central African Republic, Mali, and Nepal.

Kazakhstan’s role as a middle power with a certain degree of international influence and credibility is evident in its mediating function, with an emphasis on the possibilities of preventive diplomacy and mediation.

Astana has repeatedly demonstrated its success in this area by providing a negotiation platform for addressing complex international issues. Thus, while expanding economic cooperation with Iran, which was under sanctions, Kazakhstan contributed to persuading the leadership of the Islamic Republic of the advisability of concluding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran’s nuclear program with the so-called “P5+1” group (the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Russia, China, and Germany).

Iran’s expressed trust in Kazakhstan, according to experts, possibly the only state at that time, served as the basis for holding two rounds of JCPOA negotiations in Almaty in 2013 with the participation of representatives of the “P5+1”. This allowed the negotiation process to move forward, bringing it to the final stage for the signing of the JCPOA in Vienna in 2015.

Astana also became the venue for negotiations on the Syrian crisis – in 2017, Russia, Türkiye, and Iran, with the participation of representatives of official

Damascus and the Syrian opposition, agreed on the military-political lines of interaction in Syria (the so-called Astana Process).

Kazakhstan acted as a “mediator” between Moscow and Ankara after the incident in 2015, when a Turkish fighter jet shot down a Russian Su-24 bomber in Syria, an event that brought relations between the two sides to the brink of direct conflict.

Kazakhstan continues to offer mediation services, relying on its successful diplomatic experience and good relations with many countries of the world, for example, in the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace negotiations or in strengthening interstate relations in Central Asia.

“We are not afraid to offer our assistance in finding solutions to protracted conflicts. This is confirmed by our recent commitment to host peace talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia – an effort that underscores our belief in the power of middle powers to promote dialogue and foster peace” [17], stated President Tokayev in this regard.

A characteristic feature of Kazakhstan’s international behavior is its commitment to multilateralism, whose core mechanisms are multilateral international organizations. In the system of international relations, these organizations essentially serve as channels of cooperation and dialogue among countries.

Kazakhstan is a member of the UN, OSCE, CICA, OIC, ECO, SCO, CIS, EAEU, CSTO, and OTS.

In each specific case, the country’s accession to one of these international organizations pursued its own goal – to be an equal member of the international community, to ensure the independence, territorial integrity, and sovereignty of the country, to obtain guarantees of peace and security, and to promote the achievement of the republic’s economic objectives and the establishment of humanitarian contacts with foreign countries.

For example, after becoming a member of the United Nations, Kazakhstan gained a real opportunity to fully participate in international cooperation and in addressing global political, economic, environmental, social, cultural, and humanitarian issues. The main objectives of this activity are to work toward ensuring the country’s strategic interests in the international arena in the field of global and regional security, the establishment of a just world order in politics and the economy, the creation of frameworks for sustainable development, and the harmonization of relations among members of the international community.

The result of these foreign policy actions was the international recognition of Kazakhstan as a full-fledged and respected subject of international relations, corresponding in its status and influence to that of a middle power.

Being deeply committed to the multilateral approach, Kazakhstan has consistently made efforts to create new platforms for international dialogue and joint action.

In this regard, an important achievement of Kazakhstan is the organization and holding since 2003 of the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, a unique dialogue platform where representatives of various faiths discuss pressing

issues of global development and opportunities for cooperation in addressing them.

In addressing key issues of Asian security, a notable initiative of Kazakhstan is the convening of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), with the prospect of its transformation into a regional Organization for Security and Development (OSD). Thanks to Astana's persistent efforts, supported by key states of the Asian continent, CICA today unites 28 countries, while another 10 countries and 5 international organizations, including the UN and the OSCE, hold observer status [51].

In the modern world, marked by extreme geopolitical turbulence and ongoing conflicts, the need for multilateral solutions is more relevant than ever. Today, the efforts of all countries are required to breathe new life into the multilateral system, which is undergoing serious tests of its resilience and effectiveness. Expressing regret that major powers are increasingly reluctant to trust this process, while smaller countries lack sufficient influence, President Tokayev believes that it is the duty of middle powers to lead this movement [17].

Kazakhstan is well aware that the fulfillment of this task requires tremendous diplomatic skill and relentless efforts to unite supporters. At the same time, a sober assessment of its own capabilities and of the overall situation in the world allows the country to hope that it will be able to make a tangible contribution to the implementation of this mission.

Kazakhstan enjoys a reputation as a reliable and responsible partner on the international stage. Astana's foreign policy is characterized by balance, pragmatism, commitment to the principles and norms of international law and the UN Charter, and firm adherence to its treaty obligations. At the same time, Kazakhstan demonstrates constructiveness, flexibility, and persistence in seeking multilateral compromise solutions, which makes it an effective "broker" in achieving the desired outcome.

Like many other middle and small states, Kazakhstan links the resolution of global and regional problems with the restoration of the role of multilateral international institutions as connecting and regulating elements of the global architecture of security and cooperation. Central importance in this regard is attached to the reform of the United Nations and its key body – the Security Council.

Astana regards the United Nations as an irreplaceable universal organization bearing the primary responsibility for maintaining peace and stability on the planet.

At the same time, it is evident that the UN's ability to perform this function has been seriously weakened. Wars and conflicts in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa have become a reality of modern life; the number of hungry people and refugees in the world has increased, and climate change is accelerating at an alarming rate. Meanwhile, institutions created to promote international consensus, such as the United Nations, are facing paralysis and deadlock [17].

In this regard, Kazakhstan proposes to accelerate the process of transforming the United Nations by creating "a group of like-minded states that will, in a highly professional manner and without hesitation, put forward concrete proposals for reforming the UN so that it better meets the challenges of today and the tasks of

tomorrow” [44]. For its part, Astana’s vision of this process includes the following points.

First. Introduce clarifications into the UN Charter that would establish clear criteria for interpreting international events and conflicts and eliminate existing inconsistencies in the application of the principle of territorial integrity of states and the right of nations to self-determination. Kazakhstan advocates the primacy of the principle of territorial integrity of states. “The fundamental principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the peaceful settlement of disputes must be strictly observed, without any exceptions,” stated President Tokayev in this regard at the 80th session of the United Nations.

In addition, the provisions of the Charter concerning “enemy states,” which are a historical legacy of the Second World War, require revision. They have already been recognized as outdated by the overwhelming majority of the international community [44].

Second. Update the mechanism for decision-making at the international level by rebooting the functions and adapting the goals of UN institutions to meet the needs of the 21st century.

Third. Reform the global financial architecture in order to reduce the debt burden of developing countries and improve their access to international financing, as well as to ensure sustainable development and combat climate change.

Fourth. Reform the UN Security Council by expanding the geographical representation of countries of the Global South in the body and correspondingly increasing the number of non-permanent members of the Security Council.

Fifth. Expand the composition of the permanent members of the Security Council. Major states of Asia, Africa, and Latin America should be represented in the Security Council on a rotational basis. In addition, Kazakhstan is firmly convinced that the voices of responsible middle powers should also be significantly strengthened in the Security Council. In fact, middle powers have already begun to play a more substantial and positive role in international relations, providing balance and building trust. They can serve as bridges within the United Nations at a time when great powers are divided or unable to address pressing global issues [44].

Sixth. Adjustment of the veto power of the permanent members of the UN Security Council toward strengthening the possibility of adopting collective decisions.

Seventh. The establishment within the UN structure of a new multilateral body focused on biosafety, with the aim of preventing the destructive consequences of artificial pandemics and bioterrorism on a global scale.

The introduction of these changes into the work of the United Nations could contribute to enhancing the Organization’s functional effectiveness and to the formation of a more just and stable world order [52].

2.3. KAZAKHSTAN'S MULTI-VECTOR STRATEGY

Based on national interests and geostrategic assessments, Kazakhstan adheres to a multi-vector policy that allows it to hedge external risks and obtain maximum dividends from multilateral cooperation. The strategy applied in this context can be defined as a combination of geostrategic balancing and pragmatic alignment. The main goal of such a strategy is to ensure Kazakhstan's independence, which implies territorial, political, and economic sovereignty, as well as the ability to pursue an independent foreign policy in the interests of the state, society, and the citizens of the country.

The implementation of this strategy is based on building in Kazakhstan a balance of interests among the leading world powers, Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union, which, in theory, should provide room for foreign policy maneuvering while simultaneously serving the interests of Kazakhstan's security and stability. Recently, this equation has come to include emerging regional powers that are showing interest in cooperation with our country, in particular Türkiye, Japan, South Korea, and the Gulf states. It is extremely important that the mutual balancing of forces and interests exerts a restraining influence on the great powers' rivalry for influence in Kazakhstan.

A distinctive feature of Kazakhstan's strategy of geopolitical balance is that it does not imply a mechanical equality of external interests or a resulting "neutralization" of their influence. It is rather about Kazakhstan's more subtle approach, i.e., a selective consideration of foreign interests, as well as the directions and degree of cooperation with "balancing" countries, so that the interests of global players do not lead to manifestations of confrontation on the territory of Kazakhstan.

Thus, Astana views Russia's political interests in ensuring its security along the Kazakh and Central Asian directions with understanding, while cooperation in the economic and cultural-humanitarian spheres is of a mutually beneficial nature. In 2024, trade turnover between Kazakhstan and Russia amounted to 27.8 billion US dollars [53], with Russian investment inflows reaching 4 billion US dollars [54].

The coincidence of interests between the two countries in the development of interstate relations became the basis for the signing of the Treaty on Good-Neighborliness and Alliance in the 21st Century in 2013 and the 2014 Agreement on the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union. Together with Russia, Kazakhstan is among the founding members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), created in 1992 with the goal of "strengthening peace, international and regional security and stability, and jointly protecting the independence, territorial integrity, and sovereignty of the member states, giving priority to political means for achieving these objectives"

¹⁸The need to modernize the United Nations in order to adapt it to the realities and needs of the new era was already evident in the 1990s. Since then, this issue has been constantly raised both by UN member states and by the leadership of the Organization itself. The current UN Secretary-General, A. Guterres, stated directly: "The idea is clear: we will not be able to create a worthy future for our grandchildren with a system built for our grandparents. The Summit of the Future (to be held within the framework of the 79th session of the UN General Assembly at the end of September 2024) will provide an opportunity to reboot multilateral cooperation in accordance with the needs of the 21st century."

(Article 3 of the CSTO Charter) [55]. Kazakhstan's defense capability is further strengthened by the Agreement on Military-Technical Cooperation between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation of October 16, 2020. Overall, the contractual and legal framework of bilateral relations comprises more than 300 fundamental documents.

In the absence of systemic contradictions between the two countries, they have managed to successfully coordinate their interests in almost all areas of interstate relations, which makes Russia one of the leading parties in the geopolitical balance of power in Kazakhstan.

At the same time, Astana pursues its own national interests. For instance, it has repeatedly been stated at the official level that Kazakhstan "will not become a tool for circumventing Western sanctions against Russia," in order to avoid facing secondary sanctions itself and to maintain its position with an important Western partner.

Another influential side of the geopolitical "rectangle" represented in Kazakhstan by the world's power centers is China.

Relations between Kazakhstan and China are built on the basis of an "eternal comprehensive strategic partnership," proclaimed in 2019 in the joint communiqué of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the People's Republic of China.

Both sides are interested in the stability and security of Kazakhstan, including China, for implementing its geostrategic plans in the western direction and ensuring stability in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of the PRC. The convergence of interests between Astana and Beijing also lies in the areas of resource development (raw materials in exchange for investment), mutual access to markets (both sides face restrictions, including those related to the EAEU), and the development of transport infrastructure (the alignment of China's "Belt and Road" initiative with Kazakhstan's state program "Nurly Zhol," including the Middle Corridor).

China is Kazakhstan's leading trading partner at the country level. The trade turnover between Kazakhstan and China in 2024 amounted to 43.8 billion US dollars, which is 39% higher than the previous year (31.5 billion US dollars) [56]. The volume of gross inflow of direct investment from China into Kazakhstan in 2023 amounted to 1.7 billion US dollars, which is 15.3% higher compared to the same period in 2022 (1.4 billion US dollars) [57].

China also offers Kazakhstan technological cooperation. For example, Kazakhstan's participation in the Chinese project to build a lunar base and the construction of a nuclear power plant in Kazakhstan based on Chinese technologies.

Recently, China has expressed its readiness to become a guarantor of the security, territorial integrity, and sovereignty of Central Asia. This undoubtedly corresponds to the interests of Kazakhstan, which strives for a multilateral approach to ensuring stability and security in the region.

¹⁶Earlier agreements between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the People's Republic of China, starting from 2011, contained the wording "comprehensive strategic partnership."

On the other hand, while recognizing the significant benefits that cooperation with Beijing brings, Astana carefully monitors the associated risks, such as the strengthening of China's unilateral influence in Kazakhstan, economic dependence on China (in finance, consumer goods, machinery and equipment, freight transport), competitive pressure on the industrial sector of the economy (especially the production of consumer goods, mechanical engineering, and the construction industry), and the export of raw materials, including agricultural products. In this regard, Kazakhstan, in addition to diversifying its foreign economic relations, also applies certain restrictive measures on imports from China in order to protect its economic interests.

Astana attaches great importance to the development of cooperation with the European Union, an influential actor in international relations. Kazakhstan regards the EU as a center of power whose positions are necessarily taken into account by all participants in international relations. Astana also closely monitors the processes related to the European Union's aspiration to strengthen its geopolitical role in the world within the framework of the EU's concept of "strategic autonomy."

The field of intersection of mutual interests lies in trade and economic relations, where the EU's emphasis is expressed in the export of high-value-added goods and the import of raw materials, especially critical materials. In turn, Kazakhstan is interested in strengthening and diversifying the country's economic base, primarily in terms of industrialization, the development of the mining and agro-industrial sectors, and support for sustainable development and the "green transition." Here, alongside the EU's investment opportunities, European experience is also considered valuable for Kazakhstan.

The main legal framework for the economic cooperation between the parties is the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which entered into force in March 2020. Also of great importance is the Memorandum of Understanding between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the European Union on Strategic Partnership in the Field of Sustainable Raw Materials, Batteries, and Renewable Hydrogen Value Chains, signed in November 2022.

The European Union is Kazakhstan's largest trading and investment partner, accounting for 30% of Kazakhstan's foreign trade and 45% of accumulated foreign investment. According to the Ministry of Trade and Integration of the Republic of Kazakhstan, in 2023, the total volume of trade between Kazakhstan and EU countries reached 41.4 billion US dollars, which is 3.5% higher than the same period in 2022 [58] (exports to the EU: 31 billion US dollars, imports from the EU: 10.4 billion US dollars). As of 2023, the total volume of EU investment in Kazakhstan since the early 1990s has exceeded 175 billion US dollars [59].

In political terms, the cooperation between Kazakhstan and the European Union takes into account the EU's active participation in addressing global problems and challenges, including issues of international security, climate change, assistance

to developing countries, and others, which makes the EU a global-scale actor. For Kazakhstan, cooperation with the European Union in international organizations is especially valuable, since there is alignment on many positions of the global and regional agenda. Influencing within these institutions, the EU can promote common interests or, when necessary, help form coalitions in support of Kazakhstan.

Another key participant in the geopolitical balance of power in Kazakhstan is the United States, whose strategic interests and capabilities exert the main restraining influence on the impact of Russia and China. The United States is interested in cooperation with Kazakhstan due to its geostrategic location in the center of Eurasia, directly at the junction with Russia and China (which affects their security in vulnerable areas), its rich mineral resources (primarily oil, gas, and uranium), its transit and transport potential (in terms of the ability to control one of the main communication routes between China and Europe), and Kazakhstan's influence in Central Asia (which facilitates the projection of U.S. influence onto the region). In other words, Kazakhstan holds multifaceted significance for the United States in the context of global rivalry.

In turn, Kazakhstan is also interested in cooperation with the United States both economically and politically. This interest is determined primarily by the opportunity to attract U.S. public and private investments, as well as by America's assistance in international financing through global institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, where the United States has significant influence. In addition, access to American technologies is important for Kazakhstan, as they play a major role in the modernization of the economy, particularly in the development of the oil and gas sector, communications, and high-tech industries. Finally, Astana cannot afford to ignore the global role and influence of the United States as a superpower, which determines the relevance and necessity of political engagement with Washington.

At present, an expanded strategic partnership has been established between Kazakhstan and the United States, with more than 100 interstate, intergovernmental, and interagency agreements signed.

In 2023, the trade turnover between Kazakhstan and the United States increased by 32.7% compared to 2022, reaching more than 4 billion US dollars [60].

The United States remains the second-largest investor in Kazakhstan's economy by country (after the Netherlands). Among the most attractive sectors for investment cooperation are the financial sector, energy, retail trade, mechanical engineering, mining, transport, communications, pharmaceuticals, and real estate.

Over the past decades, the United States has made a significant contribution to the establishment and development of Kazakhstan's energy sector and continues to remain the main investor in this field. U.S. investments in the three largest oil fields: Tengiz, Kashagan, and Karachaganak have amounted to more than 176 billion US dollars [61].

Agreements have been reached with leading American companies on technology

transfer in the fields of aviation and space industries, agriculture, transport, the IT sector, and digitalization [62].

The two countries also cooperate in the military sphere: until 2019, joint military exercises were held in Kazakhstan with the participation of U.S. and NATO forces (“Zhargem,” “Balance-Kayak,” “Steppe Eagle”). The Pentagon authorized the supply to Kazakhstan of certain types of military equipment (military transport and reconnaissance aircraft, attack helicopters, armored vehicles, and special inspection equipment). Joint activities were also carried out in the training of Kazakh peacekeepers and in combating terrorism.

At the same time, Astana, guided by its national interests, demonstrates independence in its foreign policy: Kazakhstan refused to join the U.S. and EU anti-Russian sanctions and earlier declined to participate in the Western campaign criticizing China over alleged discrimination against national minorities in that country.

In its relations with these centers of power, Kazakhstan proceeds from the following principles: externally – political relations will not be directed against third parties; no threat to Russia or China will ever emanate from the country’s territory; and the economic interests of all foreign partners will be fairly taken into account; internally – the focus will be on the development of democracy, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights and freedoms.

Thus, by diversifying its relations with various centers of power, Kazakhstan has managed to achieve the main goal without entering into confrontation with anyone. It has turned its territory into a space of geopolitical neutrality and cooperation, where all parties share a common interest – the stability and sustainable development of Kazakhstan.

At the same time, Kazakhstan’s geographical position in the center of the Eurasian continent and geopolitical realities determine the necessity of pragmatic alignment with its great neighbors – Russia and China. In the case of Russia, this is determined by a set of factors: historical – the long period of being part of a single state (the Russian Empire and later the USSR); Kazakhstan’s economic interests – Russia is one of Kazakhstan’s leading trading partners, a major supplier of essential goods, and a market for Kazakh products; Kazakhstan’s transport dependence on Russia for access to global markets; the presence of a large Russian diaspora in Kazakhstan; cooperation in the scientific and educational spheres; and Russia’s informational influence. In addition, the Russian Federation plays a leading role in the regional security system of Central Asia and provides Kazakhstan with most of its defense products.

The expediency of pragmatic rapprochement with China is beyond doubt, both

¹⁷According to calculations based on data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the gross inflow of direct investment from the Netherlands into Kazakhstan from 2005 to 2023 amounted to 117.7 billion US dollars, and from the United States – 98.1 billion US dollars.

from the standpoint of the economy and Kazakhstan's strategic security. The PRC is our country's largest trading partner, the largest and closest market, a significant investor, and a supplier of many goods and equipment that play an important role in the stable functioning of Kazakhstan's economy. Through China passes the transport route that provides Kazakhstan with access to the World Ocean (the port of Lianyungang), and China itself is a key participant in the strategically important Middle Corridor transit route for Kazakhstan. Peaceful development and security in the Central Asian region and, consequently, the well-being of the peoples living here, including our country, largely depend on normal relations with Beijing.

Given the role and importance of Russia and China for Kazakhstan's stable and secure development, it can be stated that Astana will continue in the future to adhere to a rational choice in favor of cooperation with these powers.

Kazakhstan's alignment with Russia and China is reflected not only in the format of bilateral relations but also at the multilateral level. Kazakhstan is a member of associations where the dominant influence of Russia and/or China is quite evident, namely, the SCO, the EAEU, and BRICS+.

Nevertheless, Kazakhstan's pragmatic alignment with Russia and China has its limits, defined primarily by the national interests of the Republic of Kazakhstan and considerations of geopolitical security. "While remaining open to the world, we remain vigilant and proactive in countering external challenges. We will never hesitate to defend the legitimate rights and interests of Kazakhstan, let alone sacrifice our core interests," stated President Tokayev in this regard [63].

It should be specifically noted that Kazakhstan is not a satellite dependent on great powers. It seeks to ensure its own "strategic autonomy" and independent role in the world, using all legitimate means in its foreign policy to achieve this. In particular, the efforts of the Republic of Kazakhstan are aimed at promoting regional integration processes, developing and implementing common interests of Central Asia, and strengthening its agency as a collective actor on the world stage. An effective instrument of this approach is the "C5+1" format, which has become widespread over the past decade. Today, such platforms exist in the relations of Central Asian countries with the United States, Russia, China, the European Union, Japan, South Korea, and India. Kazakh President K. K. Tokayev emphasized the great benefits and prospects of cooperation in this format, comparing it to Singapore's foreign policy model of "overlapping circles of friends" [63].

The international role of Central Asia within the SCO is highly valued. Thus, the Astana Declaration of the SCO (2024) emphasizes: "The member states reaffirm that Central Asia is the core of the SCO" [64]. "This is the consensus of the SCO member states regarding the strategic status of the Central Asian region and its role within the SCO space," emphasized SCO Secretary-General Zhang Ming in this regard [65].

Another instrument for strengthening Kazakhstan's international standing and independence is its participation in the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), an

international association established in 2009 to promote comprehensive cooperation among Turkic countries (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Türkiye; observer states are Hungary and Turkmenistan). According to the strategic document “Vision of the Turkic World – 2040”, adopted at the Istanbul Summit of the OTS in 2021, the future of this organization is linked to its transformation into a geopolitically significant regional center of power, uniting the economic, financial, transport, investment, and international potential of its member states. Accordingly, Kazakhstan’s political standing, as one of the main actors of the OTS, will also increase.

In general, Kazakhstan, as a middle power, makes a significant contribution to building a stable and secure world order based on equal cooperation among all states and peoples. At the same time, the foreign policy credo of our country is embodied in the formula: “A Just Kazakhstan Committed to Globalization” [66].

¹⁸The status of Central Asia as the “core of the SCO” is enshrined in the Dushanbe Declaration (2021), the Samarkand Declaration (2022), the New Delhi Declaration (2023), the Astana Declaration (2024), and other important SCO documents.

CONCLUSION

The modern world faces major challenges at the global, regional, and national levels. The fundamental changes that have taken place in the world order over the past three decades lie at their core. The new realities include the processes of forming a polycentric world order, in which new global centers of power, China and India, are rising to replace the unipolar Pax Americana, the European Union is strengthening its “strategic autonomy,” and Russia is attempting to restore its global role. The consequence of polycentrism is the fragmentation of the world order, which has a destructive effect on the post-war global system of political and trade-economic relations. In the struggle for a “place under the sun” among the world’s power centers, contradictions and rivalries are intensifying, threatening the very foundations of the safe and stable existence of humankind. New challenges to security are being added to traditional ones – international terrorism and extremism, transnational organized crime, cyberattacks, information wars, and the unpredictability of artificial intelligence applications. The existential problem of climate change caused by global warming has become an issue requiring urgent efforts from the entire international community.

“There is no question that the international world order — the balanced system that has led to relative peace and stability and delivered rising living standards, opportunities and prosperity — is under threat in a way we haven’t seen since the cold war,” stated Richard Moore and William Burns, the heads of the British and U.S. foreign intelligence services, in their joint article for The Financial Times [67].

Therefore, the urgent task of humanity at the current stage of its development is the reformatting of the world order, which should be based on more just and equitable relations, the exclusion of war and violence, indivisible security, an open global economy, technological cooperation, and the pursuit of social progress.

While recognizing the significant role of the great powers in this process, middle powers will play no less important a part. In a divided world, they act as bridges between the West and the East, the North and the South, serving as stabilizers of the world order by contributing to the de-escalation of international tensions and the peaceful settlement of conflicts. Middle powers stand at the forefront of the movement for the democratization of international relations through the transformation of the UN Security Council and other international institutions and organizations, by ensuring broader and more equitable representation of the interests of middle and small states. Finally, middle powers themselves are beginning to play an increasingly important role in global processes, representing an independent collective force.

The growing activation of middle-power diplomacy, which is becoming increasingly visible against the background of emerging multipolarity in world politics, is based on the non-confrontational nature of their strategic culture and the priority of peaceful

and constructive cooperation, a principle shared by the majority of states in the world. This enables middle powers to effectively employ strategies of alliance and coalition building, as well as other instruments of multilateral diplomacy, such as participation in international organizations and (trans)regional integration formats, to advance their own agendas and strengthen their influence in international affairs.

Kazakhstan is among the middle powers gaining global significance. Its influence on regional processes in Central Asia, productive interaction with global centers of power, and diplomatic achievements in international organizations are widely recognized. In this regard, the recognition and consolidation of Kazakhstan as a middle power testify to the strengthening of its agency on the world stage, as Kazakhstan has established itself as a reliable partner and a responsible actor in the international community

Relying on its diplomatic experience, Kazakhstan skillfully communicates its positions to the international community and advances global and regional initiatives in the interests of peace, security, and cooperation. A distinctive “calling card” of the country’s foreign policy is its balanced approach to global issues, pursuit of compromise, and emphasis on cooperation.

It is no exaggeration to say that, among the ranks of middle powers, Kazakhstan, despite its relative “youth,” has already become a mature player of international stature. At the same time, it is worth noting the appeal and practical significance of Kazakhstan’s example of ascent in the global hierarchy for young sovereign states, guiding them toward the comprehensive development of their potential, including the strengthening of their positions and influence on the international stage.

Thus, as global development trends show, the role of middle powers in shaping the future world order will be of great importance. In this regard, Kazakhstan once again calls on all nations to cooperate in the name of a peaceful present and a prosperous, harmonious future. In the words of President Tokayev: “The task is not an easy one, but through determination, leadership, and a firm commitment to dialogue, we can turn today’s challenges into tomorrow’s successes. Let us pave the way toward an era of multilateral renewal” [17].

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