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1. Introduction

The global interstate system that existed for about thirty years as a certain international order with its distinctive hierarchy of powers is changing. This change brings risks and threats for many nations and international institutions[1], but it also offers opportunities for many other countries whose interests were previously marginalized. For example, the middle powers' interests may have much better prospects in the international arena until the new international order stabilizes[2].

In this paper, I will specifically examine the opportunities that the evolving global interstate system opened recently for middle powers like Turkey and Kazakhstan, and how these nations respond to these prospects. Both cases are situated within the rapidly changing international landscape of Eurasia, a continent that has emerged as a source of increasing pressure on the previous global order. I will demonstrate that this pressure arises not only from the states aspiring to great power status but also from the middle powers of the region.

2. What are the Middle Powers?

There is no unified approach toward measuring a state's 'size' in the interstate system. However, national leaders, practicing diplomats, and IR scholars widely use the terms like 'superpower,' 'great power,' or 'middle power.' Behind these terms, both IR theories and common sense refer to the fact that governments have

1 For example, see the most recent risk assessments in: European Union, 2024; S & P Global, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2024.

2 On such opportunities see discussion in: Krastev, 2022; Minakov, 2023; Pomeroy and Akram, 2024.

unequal opportunities in the pursuit of their states' interests in political, economic, and many other spheres. All the complex relations, differences, and contradictions around state sovereignty, territoriality, and (non)interference put the states into three major categories: political entities of the global core, periphery, and in-between (Fox, 1980; Kennedy, 1989; Wallerstein, 1996). These categories address the way national governments use their key resources—geographical position, population, economic resources, military, diplomacy, and national identity—in relations with other nations, as well as the status of their states in the hierarchy of the interstate system.

Viewed from such a perspective, the global core includes superpowers and great powers. The first type is expected to hold a globally dominant position in projecting power in all regions of the world, to lead other political entities of the world-system's core, and to have the biggest gain from three major types of international exchange, economic, political, or cultural. Economically, a superstate supports its monopolies, benefits from international trade, suppresses competition on the international market, and has the highest level of added value. This kind of state holds non-questioned political influence on international legal and political orders. In the cultural sphere, a superpower produces globally consumed cultural products, defines global identity hierarchies, and determines legitimacy definitions of international order. The great powers are also in dominant positions, but their influence varies from region to region and from sphere to sphere. Core states safeguard their dominance using not only national resources, but also through transnational administrative, legal, financial, trade, security, education, and mass information systems (Kennedy, 1989; Wallerstein, 1996, 2004; Arrighi, 1999, 2008).

The periphery comprises small states that are on the other side of the interstate system. The small states are under the core monopolies' pressure, follow the imposed competition rules, have minimal added value, and suffer from widespread poverty. Their governments share political influence with the superpowers, the great powers, and the middle powers inside their own countries. These nations consume the core's cultural product, identities' hierarchies, as well as education and scholarship products. The possibilities of the peripheral states are determined by the core states or transnational agencies (Wallerstein, 1996, 2004; Arrighi, 1999, 2008; Agh, 2016).

Between these two basic categories, there are states—middle powers—that either descend from their great power status towards a lesser IR role or grow from the periphery into a more influential transnational player. The middle power category appears as transitive in opposition to the two basic types of states-members of the global interstate system. They try to establish monopolies able to compete with the core ones, benefit—at least partially—from global economic exchange, increase their level of added value, and reduce their populations' poverty. The middle states have political influence in one or several regions, but it is constantly undermined by the core states. The middle powers produce their own and consume the core's cultural product. And they can be under the biggest pressure from core-defined identity hierarchies and legitimacy definitions (Wallerstein, 1996, 2004; Arrighi, 1999, 2008; Agh, 2016). At the same time, the middle states are those international actors who support adherence by all (and especially great) powers to

formal international norms and rules, thus stabilizing the interstate system (Jordaan, 2003; Oosterveld and Torossian, 2018).

The definitions provided pertain to the roles of states within a stable interstate system. However, during periods of change, the hierarchy of the interstate system can shift. The most significant transformation of such a kind occurred with the dissolution of the USSR, the Eastern Bloc, and the network of socialist states between 1988 and 1992 (Huntington, 1999; Walker, 2003). Since that time, the world-system's core included the global West with the United States as the sole superpower and Western European states as great powers (Steel, 1995; McCormick, 2017). Concurrently, the Russian Federation, which was once the Soviet core, descended in its IR role, while China has begun its ascent toward great power status (Rosecrance, 2006; Rich, 2013; Shakleina, 2013; Stephen, 2013; Brady, 2017).

The current transformation of the interstate hierarchy appears to have begun some time ago. Both the United States and the European Union are increasingly focused on defending their core status (Puri, 2024; European Commission, 2024). Russia's aggressive actions on the international stage aim to restore its position among the great powers, while China may be seeking an alternative superpower status (Clark, 2023; Groitl, 2023; Ramani, 2023; Baumann, Haug & Weinlich, 2024). The interstate system is becoming significantly more pluralistic, with geopolitical divisions increasing exponentially. Consequently, Manichean binary oppositions are becoming less applicable for understanding the dynamics of global politics and economy.

In times of stability, middle powers appear to be of a transitive nature within the hierarchy of the interstate system[3]. However, during times of the system's stress, middle powers demonstrate a greater ability to utilize their resources effectively and assume a more significant role in international relations. In the evolving international landscape, the transitivity of middle powers offers countries like Turkey and Kazakhstan opportunities to enhance their economic, political, and cultural influence in one or more regions, while also diminishing Western influence over them. While research attention is often focused on China, India, and Russia as the rising powers in Eurasia, the dynamics of the continent's interstate system is considerably more complex due to the actions of the middle powers.

3. The Case of Turkey

The Republic of Türkiye exemplifies a long-standing middle power that, despite the transitive nature of such a status, has managed to navigate several shifts in interstate hierarchies across the Asian and European continents over the past century. In the last decade, Turkish power elites have seemingly reached a consensus that "the primacy of Western powers in global politics has been in relative decline" and "the world has been moving to a post-American world order," at least in Eurasia and Africa (Oğuzlu, 2023, p. 673). This understanding has driven Turkey to

3 The transitive, unsubstantial status of the middle powers, as well as their varieties (developed, developing, rising), are well described by Matthew Stephen (2013).

more actively pursue its national interests across all three spheres of international relations in various regions surrounding it.

Türkiye did not possess a solid economic foundation for a proactive foreign policy. Indeed, its GDP growth between 2013 and 2023 was volatile, and its monetary policy struggled to stabilize sharp currency fluctuations. Nevertheless, the Turkish economy grew from nearly $680 billion in 1990 to $973 billion in 2000, $1.44 trillion in 2010, and $2.94 trillion in 2023. This growth significantly outpaced the average in Eastern Europe and the MENA region. Additionally, the Turkish population increased from 54.3 million in 1990 to 64 million in 2000, 73 million in 2010, and 85.3 million in 2023. This demographic growth provides the Turkish government with a burgeoning human resource base, which contrasts sharply with the situation in Eastern European countries (World Bank, 2024b).

An important issue is that Turkish foreign policy may contradict its certain economic interests while simultaneously supporting others. For instance, Ankara's involvement in the Libyan and Syrian civil wars, as well as its military operation in Azerbaijan against Nagorno-Karabakh, contributed to economic slowdowns in the 2010s (World Bank, 2024b). Nevertheless, Turkey maintained its position as the 17th largest economy in the world, which bolstered its membership in the G20 and the OECD, where its economic and political interests aligned.

Turkey became a visibly proactive middle power in international relations with the onset of the Syrian civil war. After accepting millions of refugees, Turkey formed alliances with radical non-state actors in northern Syria to manage demographic flows and systematically influence the political and security situations in Syria and Iraq. Also, Ankara utilized jihadist groups to undermine the growing power of Kurdish factions in the region (Przyborowski, 2021). These actions often contradicted the interests of the United States and the European Union, yet Turkey persisted in implementing its own foreign policy, even when it led to political conflicts with Washington, Brussels, Berlin, or Paris. Since 2013, Turkey has been relatively isolated from the West, which has had negative implications for its security and economy but has also allowed for a more autonomous perspective on its national interests in Eurasia, Europe, and Northern Africa.

Ankara transformed the security threats posed by Russian aggression against Ukraine into an opportunity. Between 2014 and 2022, Turkey successfully maintained pragmatic relations with Russia while simultaneously countering Moscow in three regions. In Syria, Turkey supported anti-Damascus rebels in the northern provinces. In Ukraine, Ankara backed the post-Maidan government and the Crimean Tatars in their resistance to the Russian occupation of Crimea and southeastern regions. In the South Caucasus, Türkiye was a major supporter of Azerbaijan in its conflict with Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. Concurrently, Ankara engaged in sporadic antagonistic actions toward the EU and the US, despite its membership in NATO. During this period, Turkish foreign policy became increasingly autonomous, focusing on national interests and its pan-Turkist Eurasian geopolitical project (Oğuzlu, 2023; Karaveli, 2024; Mott, 2024).

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Turkey's pragmatic foreign policy has reached its full potential and become systematically "compartmentalized"

(Mott, 2024). Ankara has emerged as an active, autonomous player that is a NATO member while not adhering to the NATO anti-Russian sanctions policy. Turkey maintains multilateral economic relations with countries in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) and the Black Sea regions, as well as with Russia and China. It has carved out a unique diplomatic niche by facilitating unofficial meetings and negotiations among Russian, American, European, and Ukrainian diplomats on pressing tactical issues (Bechev, 2024; Mott, 2024). This stance of neutrality, however, does not exclude Ankara from international coalitions; on the contrary, Türkiye is actively involved in some NATO campaigns, international forces in Libya, and maintains contacts with Ukraine, Russia, the EU, the UK, the US, China, Iran, and Iraq.

Ankara promotes its own regional policy in the Middle East regarding Israel, supporting the civic administration of Palestine while politically confronting the actions of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). As part of this policy, Turkey joined the Republic of South Africa's case against Israel on August 7, 2024, aiming to prosecute the country for allegedly committing genocide in Gaza at the International Court of Justice. Simultaneously, Türkiye retains the option to block official NATO cooperation with Israel or to permit its new trade fleet to violate the blockade of Gaza Strip ports (Cagaptay, 2024).

During the same period, the Turkish military industry achieved significant technological advancements and new levels of productivity. The compartmentalized foreign policy enabled Ankara to sell weapons to Ukraine and its allies while simultaneously purchasing Russian arms and informally assisting Moscow in partially circumventing economic sanctions (Bechev, 2024; Jack, 2024).

The growing significance of cultural elements in Turkish foreign policy is becoming increasingly evident. Ankara is fostering closer political and security ties among the Turkic peoples in Central Asia, the Middle East, the Black Sea region, and the Caucasus under the ethnocultural framework of the Great Turan project (Machina, 2024; Aliyev, 2024). Additionally, Turkey is actively engaged in cultural and religious networks in MENA countries, where the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency is expanding its initiatives (Talbot, 2023). Furthermore, Turkish foreign policy promotes the values of pan-Turkism in Central Asia and the Middle East, facing little opposition from other nations of these regions (Karaveli, 2024).

Behind the cultural and ideological framework of pan-Turkism lies an economic and security agenda. Within the cooperative structure of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), Türkiye has entered into bilateral defense treaties with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. Simultaneously, under the auspices of the OTS, member states have developed a unified policy for collaboration in the energy sector, accompanied by a detailed action plan. The annual meetings of the OTS energy ministers allow Turkey and its partners to further their economic interests (Shaffer, 2024, pp. 34-36).

As we can see, the Republic of Türkiye has expanded its influence across all three spheres of international relations in the MENA and Black Sea regions, as well as in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Southern Caucasus. However, this does not change the fact that middle powers, as semi-core states, incur additional

economic costs for their political activities. Nevertheless, Ankara perceives these costs as an investment in enhancing its political influence in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East, as well as in bolstering its national economy in the future.

4. The Case of Kazakhstan

Unlike Türkiye, Kazakhstan is an emerging middle power with growing influence primarily in one Eurasian region, in Central Asia. This nation has successfully navigated the post-Soviet socio-economic crisis and has acquired the resources necessary to assume a leading position in a region where the competing influences of China, Russia, and the West intersect.

The economy of Kazakhstan endured the collapse of the Soviet Union, during which its GDP plummeted from nearly $290 billion in 1990 to $200 billion in 2000. However, it rebounded to $444 billion in 2010 and reached $705 billion in 2023. The average real GDP growth rate of 3.0% from 2013 to 2022 surpassed the 2.5% average for Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Additionally, Kazakhstan's population, which declined from 16.3 million in 1990 to 14.8 million in 2000, rebounded to 16.3 million in 2010 and subsequently approached 20 million by 2023 (World Bank, 2024a; Bibi, 2024, p. 2). In the past three years, Kazakhstan has attracted many young Russian specialists, transforming the country from a source of labor migration into a destination for skilled workers (Yumaguzin and Vinnik, 2022, p. 427).

Unlike the situation in Turkey, Astana's active foreign policy is closely aligned with Kazakhstan's economic needs. Over the past decade, Kazakhstan's economic growth has decelerated from 10% during the period from 2000 to 2007 to below 4% between 2013 and 2022. The economy has demonstrated a strong dependence on international prices for natural resources, particularly oil, and has faced stagnant productivity growth (World Bank, 2024a). Despite the necessity for foreign investment, the Kazakh government continues to seek to limit and balance the economic influences of China and Russia with those of Western nations. It appears that the Kazakhstani power elites have reached a consensus: if partial denationalization of the economy is unavoidable, it should be implemented in a balanced manner. This approach enables the government to leverage multilateralism to safeguard both its economic and political sovereignty while enhancing its influence over larger geopolitical players and neighboring countries in the region (Bibi, 2024, pp. 2-8; Nyshanbayev, Tarman, Tolen, Samay & Agybay, 2024, pp. 920-922).

Russia remains the most politically influential partner for Kazakhstan. Both countries are members of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. In 2022, Moscow played a crucial role in assisting the Kazakh government in restoring social order and facilitating the transition of power from the Nazarbayev clan to the new president. However, Kazakhstan is certainly not a "client state" of Russia. The weakening of Russia due to the Ukrainian crisis and Western sanctions has opened new opportunities for Astana in international politics and nation-building. Kazakhstan refused to support Russian aggression

against Ukraine, adopted a neutral position (which many Western countries cannot afford), and ceased to view Russia as its security provider (Mallinson, 2024).

Kazakhstan plays a complex role in the antagonism between the West and Russia, strategically leveraging this situation to balance external influences for its own advantage. Officially, Astana has committed to enforcing the Western sanctions regime; however, in practice, both formal and informal economic and political ties with Russia continue to persist and even strengthen. Currently, over 40 percent of all foreign companies operating in Kazakhstan are Russian. Moscow controls the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, which exports 79 percent of Kazakhstani crude oil. Additionally, Russian companies account for up to 25 percent of Kazakhstan's uranium production (Mallinson, 2024). More than 70 percent of transactions between Russia and Kazakhstan are conducted in rubles. Simultaneously, through the International North-South Transport Corridor, Kazakhstan controls the transportation of Russian goods to Azerbaijan, India, Iran, and Turkmenistan. Furthermore, Astana plays a crucial role in the Eurasia railway project, which connects Russia, Kazakhstan, and China (Butyrina, 2024). Therefore, the economic relationship between Russia and Kazakhstan can be characterized as interdependent: their economies are intertwined, requiring the Russian government to remain sensitive to Kazakhstani national interests.

Kazakhstan has significantly strengthened its economic and political ties with China. Economic cooperation between the two countries surged from $400 million in 1993 to over $41 billion in 2023. Kazakhstan's agricultural exports to China increased from 750,000 tons in 2019 to 3.5 million tons in 2023. The country's railway infrastructure plays a vital role in China's Belt and Road Initiative. Furthermore, total Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in Kazakhstan's economy reached the $25 billion mark in 2023. China has now surpassed Russia as Kazakhstan's primary trading partner (Mallinson, 2024; Yingshi, 2024).

Parallelly, Astana is strengthening its political ties with Beijing. In 2024, Kazakhstan hosted the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit, where the governments of both countries, along with other member states, discussed strategies for promoting regional peace and stability through multilateral mechanisms such as the SCO, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, and the China-Central Asia Summit (Bakhtiyarova and Avcu, 2022, pp. 60-62; Yingshi, 2024).

Due to Astana's strategic multilateralism, Moscow and Beijing are compelled to align their plans with one another and with Kazakhstan's leadership. However, the shared interests of Russia and China often steer Kazakhstan away from the West, positioning it as a channel to informally circumvent the sanctions regime (Mallinson, 2024).

Western countries are competing with Russia and China for stronger ties with Kazakhstan and are refraining from imposing sanctions on Kazakhstan for its ambiguous trade relations with Russia. In response, Kazakhstan maintains its membership in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and participates in the NATO Partnership for Peace program. Furthermore, Astana, Washington, and London have recently taken several steps to enhance their economic, security, and educa-

tional partnerships. Washington and Astana revived the US-Kazakhstan Enhanced Strategic Partnership Dialogue in 2024. In this initiative, the Biden administration seeks to strengthen cooperation with Kazakhstan on regional security issues in Central Asia, enhance bilateral economic relations, and advance the construction of the Trans-Caspian Transportation Corridor (U.S. Mission Kazakhstan, 2024). Within this framework, the US government views Kazakhstan not only as a national partner but also as a regional middle power. This policy initiative aligns with the increasing FDI from the US, which reached $65 billion, and a trade turnover of $4.1 billion in 2023 (Bakhtiyarova and Avcu, 2022, p. 61; Sakenova, 2024).

In 2024, Astana and London signed the UK-Kazakhstan Development Partnership Agreement. This agreement envisions an expanded partnership in the energy, education, business sectors, and green investment, benefiting not only Kazakhstan but also the entire Central Asia region. It appears that London views Astana as a key partner for cooperation in the region, similar to Washington. Additionally, Kazakhstan continues to 'import' British educational institutions to mitigate brain drain and to manage, rather than prohibit as in Russia, Western cultural influence on its population (Akhmetkali, 2024; UK Foreign Office, 2024).

Astana enhances its cultural and political influence in Central Asia through the Kazakhstan Agency for International Development (KazAID). The Agency's geographical focus includes the Central Asian countries and Afghanistan, where it promotes humanitarian assistance. Although KazAID's activities are less ambitious than those of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), Kazakhstan is transitioning from being a recipient of aid to becoming a regional donor. Over the past 20 years, Kazakhstan has provided approximately $542 million in official development assistance to its neighbors (Bakhtiyarova & Avcu, 2022, p. 59). Recently, Kazakhstan has observed a growing cultural and political presence of Turkey in Central Asia, which Astana seeks to navigate through both cooperation and competition (Balcı, 2024, pp. 65-68).

Kazakhstan is an emerging middle power that has demonstrated its ability to project influence in its relations with great powers and Central Asian states by balancing external competing interests with its own national priorities. Similar to Ankara, Astana promotes its international role as a neutral state and a platform for peace negotiations. However, in contrast to Turkey, Kazakhstan refrains from engaging in conflicts and focuses on maximizing its economic benefits through balanced cooperation.

Conclusion

As we can see, Türkiye and Kazakhstan exemplify established and emerging middle power cases, respectively. Both nations have increased their active participation in the transforming interstate system, but they act differently. Turkey is a key actor driving the change in the Eurasian landscape and is involved in several regional conflicts. In contrast, Kazakhstan adopts a more cautious stance, gradually seizing opportunities to enhance its influence within a single region.

As middle powers, Türkiye and Kazakhstan exemplify different forms of transitivity. Ankara has extensive experience in maintaining its international status throughout the 20th century and has developed a long-term strategy for the future. This position provokes the West's attempts to contain Turkey. In contrast, Astana, as a new geopolitical player, appears to adopt a more opportunistic approach. However, this approach is also strategic and yields positive political and economic outcomes. In both cases, we observe that the Western core and Eurasian great powers are increasingly compelled to consider the interests of these middle powers more than ever in the past thirty years. Thus, the transformation of international relations in Eurasia is driven by competition and antagonism among great powers, as well as by the growing assertiveness of middle powers on the continent and in nearby regions. This dynamic also contributes cumulatively to changes in the global interstate system.

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