THINKING AUTONOMY FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH: KAZAKHSTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY THROUGH PUIG AND ESCUDÉ AND REFLECTIONS FOR BRAZIL

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Kazakhstan's foreign policy amid the competition for influence between China and Russia in Central Asia, drawing on the theoretical perspectives of peripheral realism, developed by Carlos Escudé, and autonomy, proposed by Juan Carlos Puig. It assumes that the Republic of Kazakhstan, as an actor embedded in an asymmetric and multipolar regional environment, adopts pragmatic strategies of international engagement, engaging with dilemmas faced by countries of the Global South. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to assess to what extent Latin American-developed approaches can illuminate the behavior of other peripheral states, contributing to an interregional theoretical dialogue. Methodologically, the research employs a qualitative approach based on a case study, combining documentary and bibliographic analysis of Kazakh diplomatic strategies. Among the main findings, the paper highlights the peripheral rationality demonstrated by Astana, as it recognizes its strategic constraints and diversifies its alliances in order to preserve room for maneuver. It concludes that the use of locally developed analytical frameworks is not only suitable for interpreting the Kazakh

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case, but also reveals structural patterns shared across global peripheries, suggesting avenues for an international theory rooted in the Global South and offering reflections for Brazil.

Keywords: Kazakhstan. Foreign Policy. Autonomy. Brazil.

PENSANDO A AUTONOMIA DESDE O SUL: A POLÍTICA EXTERNA DO CAZAQUISTÃO À LUZ DE PUIG E ESCUDÉ E REFLEXÕES PARA O BRASIL

Resumo

O presente trabalho analisa a política externa do Cazaquistão diante da disputa por influência entre China e Rússia na Ásia Central, a partir das perspectivas teóricas do realismo periférico, de Carlos Escudé, e da autonomia, de Juan Carlos Puig. Parte-se do pressuposto que a República do Cazaquistão, enquanto ator inserido em um ambiente regional assimétrico e multipolar, adota estratégias pragmáticas de inserção internacional, dialogando com dilemas enfrentados por países do Sul Global. Logo, o objetivo central desta investigação consiste em compreender até que medida as abordagens pensadas na América Latina podem iluminar o comportamento de outros países periféricos, contribuindo para um diálogo teórico inter-regional. Metodologicamente, empregou-se uma abordagem qualitativa baseada em um estudo de caso, com análise documental e bibliográfica sobre as estratégias diplomáticas cazaques. Entre os principais achados da pesquisa, destaca-se a racionalidade periférica demonstrada por Astana, ao reconhecer seus limites estratégicos e diversificar suas alianças como forma de preservar margens de manobra. Conclui-se, portanto, que o uso de marcos analíticos pensados localmente não apenas é adequado para interpretar o caso do Cazaquistão, como também revela padrões estruturais comuns às periferias globais, sugerindo caminhos para uma teoria internacional enraizada no Sul e reflexões para o Brasil.

Palavras-chave: Cazaquistão. Política Externa. Autonomia. Brasil.

PENSAR LA AUTONOMÍA DESDE EL SUR GLOBAL: LA POLÍTICA EXTERIOR DE KAZAJISTÁN A LA LUZ DE PUIG Y ESCUDÉ Y REFLEXIONES PARA BRASIL

Resumen

El presente trabajo analiza la política exterior de Kazajistán ante la disputa por influencia entre China y Rusia en Asia Central, a partir de las perspectivas teóricas del realismo periférico, de Carlos Escudé, y de la autonomía, de Juan Carlos Puig. Se parte del supuesto de que la República de Kazajistán, como actor inserto en un entorno regional asimétrico y multipolar, adopta estrategias pragmáticas de inserción internacional, dialogando con dilemas enfrentados por los países del Sur Global. En este sentido, el objetivo central de esta investigación consiste en comprender hasta qué punto los enfoques elaborados en América Latina pueden contribuir a iluminar el comportamiento de otros países periféricos, aportando a un diálogo teórico interregional. Metodológicamente, se empleó un enfoque cualitativo basado en un estudio de caso, con análisis documental y bibliográfico sobre las estrategias diplomáticas kazajas. Entre los principales hallazgos de la investigación, se destaca la racionalidad periférica evidenciada por Astaná, al reconocer sus límites estratégicos y diversificar sus alianzas como forma de preservar márgenes de maniobra. Se concluye, por lo tanto, que el uso de marcos analíticos concebidos localmente no solo es adecuado para interpretar el caso de Kazajistán, sino que también revela patrones estructurales comunes a las periferias globales, sugiriendo caminos hacia una teoría internacional arraigada en el Sur y reflexiones para Brasil.

Palabras clave: Kazajistán. Política Exterior. Autonomía. Brasil.

1. Introduction

The theme of *autonomy* has occupied a prominent place in the International Relations agenda since the mid-twentieth century, particularly in the Latin American context, which has been marked by political and economic asymmetries. Among the leading proponents of this debate are the Argentine scholars Juan Carlos Puig and Carlos Escudé, whose theoretical propositions, grounded in peripheral realities, sought to reinterpret both the limits and the possibilities of external action available to regional states. However, rather than being merely localized reflections, these contributions continue to offer relevant analytical tools for addressing the challenges posed by an increasingly complex and competitive International System. This is especially the case in light of the relative decline of US hegemony and the rise of China as a parallel geopolitical pole, dynamics that expand global competition beyond the American continent.

In this sense, Kazakhstan's—a country located at the "heart" of Central Asia— recent trajectory offers a particularly instructive case for understanding how peripheral states position themselves vis-à-vis multipolarity in other regional settings. Despite having a population of 20 million inhabitants, a relatively small number when compared to its vast territorial extension of 2,725,000km², the Kazakh republic has pursued an active foreign policy in global affairs (Laruelle *et al*. 2019). Situated at the threshold of two major powers, Russia and China[2], this international behavior consists of maintaining a delicate balance between divergent interests, while simultaneously enabling interaction with Central Asian neighbors and with other partners such as the United States (US), the European Union (EU), Turkey, India, Pakistan, Japan, among others.

A clear illustration of this strategy, named "Multi-vector Foreign Policy," during the government of Nursultan Nazarbayev, which succeeded the Soviet Union (USSR) in the country, can be observed in Kazakhstan's growing relevance within multilateral organizations. These include the United Nations (UN), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the Organization of Turkic

2 Kazakhstan shares a common border of approximately 6,846 km with Russia and 1,780 km with China.

States (OTS), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

In addition to its multilateral commitment and its role as a West–East "bridge," Astana maintains numerous dialogue forums and strategic partnerships on a bilateral basis with Washington, Brussels, Beijing, Moscow, Ankara, Tokyo, and even with Western military alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This engagement is also visible in the country's willingness to host major international events, including the Asian Winter Games, the World Nomad Games, and specialized UN conferences and agencies (WHO, UNWTO, and UNICEF). Moreover, at the regional level, the Kazakh republic pursues another key objective: transforming Central Asia into a foundation of prestige and cooperation, enabling the joint management of resources and local development (EIA 2017; UNRCCA 2023).

Evidently, the search for alternatives to "automatic alignments" not only signals the country's posture regarding stability and security in Central Asia, but also reflects an effort to diversify diplomatic and economic ties through its energy reserves and the use of soft power.[3] In other words, it can be inferred that Kazakhstan, drawing on its peripheral systemic position, seeks autonomy by balancing distinct interests on the contemporary geopolitical chessboard. From this perspective, the following questions arise: is it possible to understand these dynamics in Central Asia through Latin American concepts? To what extent do Puig's and Escudé's frameworks provide useful analytical instruments to interpret Kazakh behavior, whose actions oscillate between alliance diversification and pragmatic rationality in asymmetric environments?

In order to address these questions, this study employs a qualitative method based on documentary and bibliographic analysis of the country's contemporary diplomatic strategies. Beyond highlighting a theoretical gap, the proposed approach seeks to value Global South scholarship by connecting geographically distant regions through convergent processes. Thus, the Kazakh case also aims to test the continued relevance of theories developed in Latin America outside their original regional context, contributing to the construction of an International Relations agenda that increasingly prioritizes Southern epistemologies. It is also worth noting that, rather than importing concepts, the purpose of this exercise is to export critical reflection, understanding how other peripheral states confront similar dilemmas in a volatile multipolar order and identifying insights for the Brazilian case.

3 In other words, a country's ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion, rather than through the use of force or coercion (hard power). According to Nye (2004), a state exercises soft power when it succeeds in getting others to want the same goals as it does, without the direct use of force.

1.1. Objectives

The general objective of this research is to analyze the foreign policy of contemporary Kazakhstan, particularly its positioning between China and Russia, through analytical approaches developed by Latin American scholars, especially Carlos Escudé's peripheral realism and Juan Carlos Puig's concept of autonomy. The study seeks to understand how a peripheral state formulates its own strategies of international engagement amid growing multipolarity, relying on pragmatic actions to balance external pressures without undermining its sovereignty.

The specific objectives are to: (a) examine the "multi-vector strategies" adopted by Kazakhstan as a means of balancing its relations with different poles of power; (b) explore the analytical utility and limitations of Latin American theories when applied to external contexts; and (c) reflect on the possible lessons that the Kazakh experience may offer to Latin American countries, particularly Brazil, which likewise faces the challenge of asserting autonomy within an international order marked by systemic asymmetries.

1.2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach, centered on a case study. To support the discussion, the research draws on a literature review of primary sources (documents and news reports) and secondary sources (journal articles and books), collected from academic databases and repositories (such as Google Scholar and CAPES' Portal de Periódicos). The aim is to interpret official records of Kazakh foreign policy (including strategies, presidential speeches, and regional action plans), as well as relevant theoretical contributions to the topic. Finally, this methodological choice is justified by the proposal to develop an applied analysis capable of broadly reflecting on the dynamics of global peripheries through a specific case. In this sense, the study of Kazakhstan is instrumental in fostering a wider dialogue on the shared challenges faced by peripheral states or by those constrained and compressed by great powers.

2. Theoretical Synthesis: Autonomy in Puig and Escudé within the International Relations Debate

Autonomy, understood as the state's capacity to make self-determined decisions, has been discussed by numerous schools and intellectual movements in International Relations, including the Latin American structuralist tradition

of Raúl Prebisch, the theses advanced by ECLAC, and Dependency Theory (Puig 1984; Martins 2011). Building upon these contributions, the former Argentine diplomat Juan Carlos Puig conceptualizes autonomy as the capacity for action and decision-making grounded in national interests in the face of external pressures, particularly those exerted by the United States (Puig 1980). In this context, Puig argues that peripheral countries should exploit the openings and gaps within the international structure in order to expand their room for maneuver.

Accordingly, Puig's critique of traditional International Relations approaches, such as Realism and Liberalism/Idealism, was directed at what he understood as a kind of "straitjacket" imposed on states located at the margins of power centers, denying such actors the possibility of agency (Puig 1980). Expanding this argument, Puig proposes a typology to capture the limits and potentialities of state action under such conditions, outlining a "metric" that ranges from "paracolonial dependence" to "secessionist autonomy." In this framework, the "heterodox stage" is the one in which a country acts strategically to secure gains without engaging in direct confrontation with the central powers (Puig 1987).

Another key concept developed by Puig is that of "solidary integration" (Puig 1987), which challenges purely economic models of regional integration by arguing that integration should be sustained by shared values and common strategic objectives, such as the pursuit of autonomy. In other words, the integrative process was not understood as an end in itself, but rather as a means to overcome dependency. Thus, the term "solidary," as Matheus Pereira (2023, 12) notes, departs from the idealistic notion of a "Latin American nation" and should instead be understood as the convergence of interests under conditions of parity.

By contrast, the sociologist Carlos Escudé, Puig's compatriot, offers a critical view of the autonomist paradigm, starting from the observation that the costs of challenging the international structure are too high for peripheral states, and that confrontation is often an empty and costly display. Escudé develops a detailed critique of realist theory in International Relations, drawing on the contributions of Hans Morgenthau (1948) and Kenneth Waltz (1979). For Escudé (1995), the problem with these authors lay in their notion of national interest as part of state "rationality," detached from the interests and interactions of domestic elites (Escudé 1995). He proposes instead a "*ciudadano-céntrica*" (citizen-centric) logic, according to which foreign policy should be guided by concrete and measurable material gains for the population (Escudé 1995, 13).

That is, within Escudé's peripheral realism (1995), autonomy is derived from costs rather than measured in terms of potential. Consequently, alignment with the hegemonic power should be interpreted as a rational survival strategy in the international arena, provided that it does not undermine the country's economic interests. Despite their differences, both Puig and Escudé start from the recognition that the systemic order is hierarchical and that peripheral states face narrow margins for decision-making. Puig insists on the possibility of transformative, albeit incremental, action, whereas Escudé advocates a "resigned" Realism that prioritizes the maximization of material gains within the "rules of the game." It is precisely at this point that the study of the Kazakh case becomes particularly relevant.

3. Between Russia and China: Kazakhstan's "Multi-vector" Foreign Policy

Abundant in natural resources such as oil, gas, and uranium, Kazakhstan has consolidated itself as one of the world's leading energy exporters. This fact not only attracts the interest of multiple companies in the sector, but also reinforces the geopolitical position the country has assumed in the international economic landscape since 1991. Suffice it to say that, driven by rising global energy prices throughout the 2000s, the GDP of the former Soviet republic surged from US$ 9 billion in 1990 to US$ 260 billion in 2023, making it approximately three times larger than Uzbekistan's economy (around US$ 90 billion) and more than twenty times the size of the Kyrgyz and Tajik economies (US$ 13 billion each) (Usov 2023).

As a result of this context, since gaining independence from the former Soviet Union (USSR) in 1991, the country has built an international engagement strategy marked by the pursuit of stability, security, and diversification. This trajectory begins under the leadership of Nursultan Nazarbayev[4] (1991-2019), regarded as the "father of Kazakhstan," whose legitimacy was constructed both through national symbols and through the formulation of a pragmatic foreign policy (Lubin 1995; Tsepkalo 1998; Williams 1999; Rahimov and Urazaeva 2005). At the international level, the president grounded his posture in the "Strategy for the Formation and Development of Kazakhstan as a Sovereign State" (1992), which, among other elements, emphasized a

4 Nursultan A'bis'uly Nazarbayev was the first president of Kazakhstan, remaining in power from the country's independence from the Soviet Union, in 1991, until 2019, when he resigned from office. The leader, who had also served as Kazakhstan's last prime minister during the socialist era, was one of the key architects of the country's nation-building (Rahimov and Urazaeva 2005).

commitment to security, special relations with Russia, and the formation of a coalition of Central Asian states (Nazarbayev 2017; Laruelle *et al*. 2019).

This policy subsequently evolved into "multi-vectorism," through which Astana expanded its diplomatic network to include not only neighboring countries but also China, Turkey, India, Pakistan, the United States, and the European Union, prioritizing multilateral negotiations and the opening of its energy market (Nazarbayev 2017; Laruelle *et al*. 2019). In this sense, Kazakhstan came to play a relevant role in global energy supply, attracting investments from major corporations such as ExxonMobil, Chevron, Shell, and BP, operating in joint ventures with local state-owned companies (EIA 2017; Cooley and Heathershaw 2017). Moreover, growing trade relations with the EU may have contributed to a partial "Westernization" of this external behavior (Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 2019).

In the security domain, in turn, Kazakhstan's voluntary renunciation of the nuclear arsenal inherited from the USSR in the 1990s, through the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I) and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), enhanced the country's positive image in the international arena. Nazarbayev achieved significant diplomatic gains by participating in forums such as CICA and the OSCE (OSCE 2022), and also succeeded in developing technical-military partnerships with Washington after the September 11 attacks, including a five-year plan to modernize Kazakh security, especially in the Caspian Sea region, in 2003. This made the country a key asset in supporting subsequent US military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan[5] (Starr *et al*. 2014; Stein 2018).

Simultaneously, relations with Moscow remained central, given Kazakhstan's landlocked condition and its dependence on neighboring infrastructure for energy exports. In addition, major Russian companies such as Gazprom, Rosneftegaz, and LUKOIL have remained present in the country's energy sector since the 1990s[6] (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017). It is therefore unsurprising that Nazarbayev remained close to the Kremlin, actively participating in

5 The agreement with Washington, which provided for the supply of defense equipment and the conduct of joint military exercises with the Kazakh Peacekeeping Battalion (KAZBAT), followed in 2009, when Nazarbayev allowed the transit of NATO troops and equipment through Kazakh territory to support the stabilization campaign in Afghanistan as part of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) (Stein 2018). Furthermore, in response to a request from the U.S., the *Majilis* legislature approved the deployment of engineers from the Kazakh Armed Forces to support U.S. operations in Iraq between 2003 and 2008 (Starr *et al.* 2014).

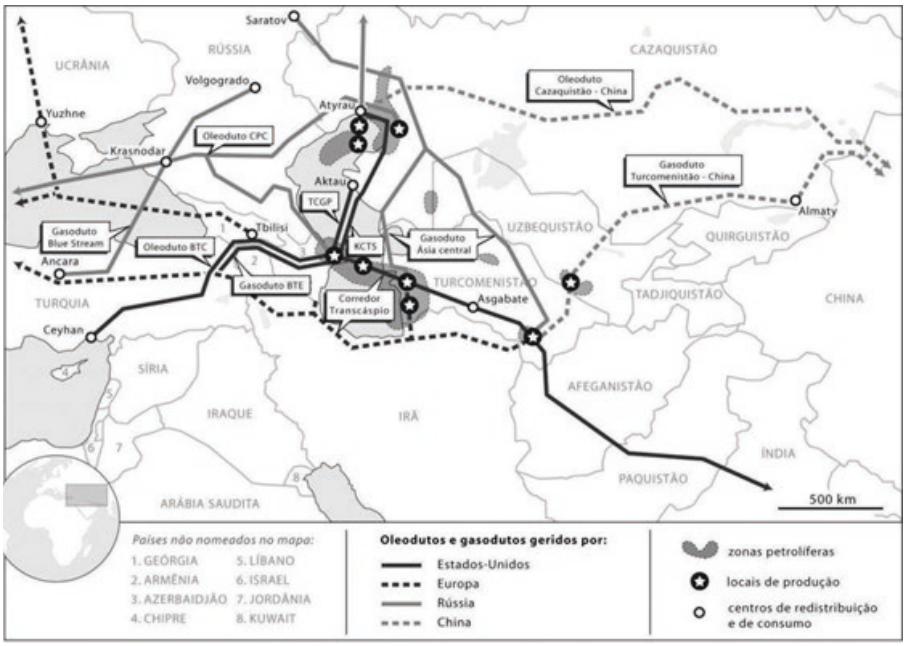
6 The major shareholders and executives of these corporations became part of the Russian economic elite and were known as the "energy oligarchs," as was the case with Nazarbayev. As a result, Russia's energy policy has often been linked to its foreign policy strategy, reflecting its multifaceted nature and making ties with Astana a key factor in understanding its relations with the region (Nahernak and Simpkins 2008; Aminjonov 2016).

the CIS and the CSTO even after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, when Kazakhstan also supported the expansion of the alliance's Collective Rapid Reaction Forces (Troitskiy and Zinoviev 2018). Similarly, with regard to China, bilateral deepening stemmed from Kazakhstan's strategic geographic position, its natural resource base, and the relevance of its territory to Beijing's logistical interests (Laruelle *et al*. 2019).

The construction of the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline and the involvement of Chinese companies such as CNPC, CNOOC, and Sinopec in local oil and gas extraction further illustrated this convergence[7] (Syroezhkin 2012). Moreover, since the 1990s, ensuring border stability and controlling Uyghur separatism encouraged Beijing's security cooperation with Kazakhstan, culminating in the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001, of which both Kazakhstan and Russia are founding members. In later years, these ties were institutionalized through a series of strategic agreements, culminating in 2015 in the formalization of the Sino-Kazakh Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. It is within this context that the former Soviet republic's central position in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) stands out, launched by Xi Jinping in Astana in 2013. Kazakhstan became a key node in the Middle Corridor, or Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), creating alternative routes to Russia and to sensitive bottlenecks in global geopolitics, such as the Straits of Malacca, Hormuz, and Bab-el-Mandeb (Taliga 2021; Kuzembayeva *et al*. 2024).

7 In the Kazakh oil and gas industry, where there are many joint ventures with Chinese shareholders, the main player is CNPC. The company acquired a stake in Kazakhstan's AktobeMunaiGas in 1997 and holds 85.42% of its shares. One of CNPC's subsidiaries in the country is PetroKazakhstan, which is involved in the acquisition, exploration, development, and production of oil and gas, particularly at Kumkol Resources in Kyzyl-Orda (Syroezhkin 2012).

Figure 1 – Map of Central Asia's energy export infrastructure



Source: Monié (2012, 23).

It is also worth noting that, at the regional level, Nazarbayev promoted initiatives aimed at integrating Central Asia under Kazakh leadership, as attempted through the Central Asian Union (CAU) (1994–1998), the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC) (1998–2001), and the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) (2001–2005). However, these initiatives, which reflected Kazakhstan's objective of containing Russian and Uzbek hegemonism in the region, did not move forward (Bobokulov 2006). Instead, Kazakhstan faced an internal dispute over bloc leadership with Uzbekistan, which pursued different political interests. Whereas Nazarbayev was primarily concerned with economic instability, his Uzbek counterpart, Islam Karimov, focused on combating local religious extremism[8] and ensuring his "regional hegemony" at any cost.[9] Frustrated with an amorphous institutional environment,

8 In the wake of the Soviet collapse, Central Asia became vulnerable to Islamic radicalism, and the precarious situation in Tajikistan (in the midst of a civil war) and Afghanistan (under Taliban rule) compounded the context of extreme policies implemented by the Uzbek government. Consequently, it did not take long for numerous fundamentalist groups to emerge in the region, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which challenged the authority of the newly independent states.

9 According to Sally Cummings (2001, 144), this difference in regional behavior stemmed from Uzbekistan's location, "geopolitically removed from Moscow's influence and with a small percentage of Russians in its

Kazakhstan gradually integrated into the Customs Union with Russia and Belarus, later known as the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) and, in 2014, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

A few years later, in 2019, following the domestic leadership transition from Nazarbayev to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev[10] (2019–present), Kazakhstan took another important step toward regional prominence with the adoption of the document *On the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020–2030*," a which aims to reposition the country as a potential Central Asian "leader" (Kazakhstan 2020). However, the social upheaval of 2022, known as "Tragic January," triggered a profound governmental reconfiguration, including the symbolic distancing of Nazarbayev's figure from national power structures and a reassessment of the country's international behavior (Nyshanbayeva *et al*. 2024).

It is true that the government's response to the massive protests that year, supported by CSTO's intervention, implied undisclosed concessions to Moscow, such as freezing the language reform that envisaged replacing the Cyrillic alphabet with the Latin script, as well as the creation of an international organization to promote the Russian language within the CIS framework. Nevertheless, Tokayev maintained Kazakhstan's political neutrality, refusing to recognize the Kremlin-backed separatist republics in Ukraine (Donetsk and Luhansk), thereby reflecting an attempt to balance historical ties with Russia through an autonomous diplomatic posture (Abbasova 2022; Ibrayeva *et al*. 2023).

Indeed, it is within this geopolitical landscape that unresolved tensions, such as the Crimea issue and the South China Sea dispute, fuel mistrust between Moscow and Beijing (Nascimento 2015; Hashimova 2020), thereby expanding Kazakhstan's room for maneuver. The decision to cancel joint military exercises with Russia in 2022, alongside other CSTO members, as well as Tokayev's public statements in defense of Ukrainian sovereignty, for instance, may be interpreted in light of a new regional reordering (Fernandes and Grantseva 2023).

population." Furthermore, the country had inherited its status from the Soviet era, both in terms of material capabilities and ideological motivations to become a Central Asian "hegemon." Tashkent's subsequent actions were thus widely recognized as the main obstacle to the region's integration.

10 Kassym-Jomart Kemeluly Tokayev became acting president of Kazakhstan following the domestic crises that led to Nazarbayev's (negotiated) resignation in 2019. A career diplomat and former Director-General of the United Nations Office in Geneva, Tokayev played a central role in the NPT agreements and also held numerous positions in the previous government, including Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and President of the Senate (Kazakhstan, 2020).

Thus, the context of the war in Ukraine not only led Beijing to intensify its attention toward Central Asia, especially as Russia's direct engagement diminished, but also created an unprecedented strategic retreat that Astana seeks to fill. Still in 2022, during an official visit to Kazakhstan, Xi Jinping reinforced this understanding and sealed cooperation grounded in the principle of "non-interference." In the same year, the "Central Asia + China" framework was also launched, signaling a gradual redirection of Kazakh foreign policy in favor of the Sino-Central Asian axis (Nyshanbayeva *et al*. 2024). This trend reflects shared objectives among local leaderships within the Belt and Road Economic Belt, and is particularly linked to Kazakhstan's new development program, Nurly Zhol (Laruelle 2018).

With regard to Central Asia itself, it should be noted that the period from 2016 to 2023 witnessed improved interstate relations and the formulation of a collaborative agenda, especially following Karimov's death and the rise of Shavkat Mirziyoyev (2016–present) in Uzbekistan. Beyond its impact on the management dynamics of water and energy resources, this shift marked the emergence of a new format for local cooperation: the Consultative Meetings of Heads of State, an annual mechanism among the five countries that has evolved under a system of rotating leadership. In this way, Kazakhstan's participation in these summits reflects not only its concern with the security agenda, particularly in the context of the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, but also its interest in seeking alternatives to "Eurasian regionalism" (UNRCCA 2023; Kuzembayeva *et al*. 2024).

Improved relations with neighbors and the establishment of the Consultative Meetings have consolidated this "horizontal" pattern and enabled Kazakhstan to expand its share in regional trade, which doubled between 2018 and 2023 (UNRCCA 2023). The success of this posture in pursuing decision-making autonomy has also preserved open channels of dialogue with the West, as illustrated by the C5+1 Forum with the United States (Cooley 2021), as well as the maintenance of cooperation with the European Union. At the same time, Kazakhstan continues to balance ties with Russia and China, taking advantage of a scenario of "veiled competition," including within the SCO, as a means of expanding its room for maneuver.

4. An "Inter-Peripheral" Autonomy: The Kazakh Case and Reflections on Brazil

As discussed above, Kazakhstan's foreign policy reveals an active posture grounded in strategic flexibility, recognizing the structural constraints imposed by its position in the International System and adapting its actions to a logic of survival. In this sense, despite Puig's and Escudé's differences regarding the concept of "autonomy," both contribute to interpreting Kazakhstan as a peripheral actor that operates with awareness of its limitations,"navigating" multipolarity without falling into irrelevance or engaging in direct confrontation with the central powers.

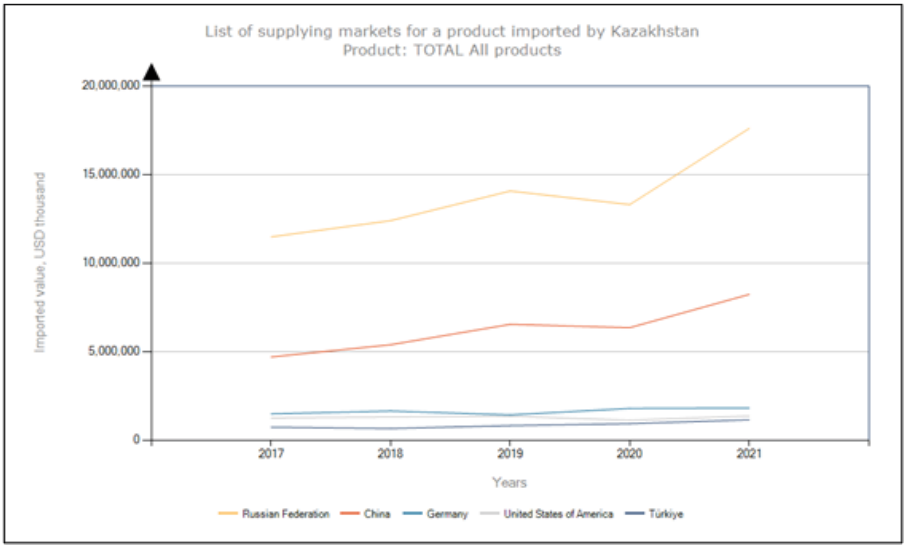
Puig's (1980, 149) notion of "heterodox autonomy" is particularly relevant in this case, as it refers to a situation in which a country acknowledges international leadership structures while acting pragmatically and rationally to preserve its margins of maneuver. An interesting aspect of this category lies in its recognition of the role of national elites and the ways in which these actors conceive the state's development process (Puig 1980; Escudé 1995). That is, it draws attention to how elites interpret the country's place in the world; how the national project relates to the external environment; the position sought within the structure of global capitalism; and the degree of confrontation that such an objective is able to mobilize. Here, Kazakhstan's relationship with Russia and with the West becomes evident, since a substantial portion of its main contribution to the international economy, energy, entails overlapping interests involving transnational corporations and deeply integrated oligarchic networks (Nahernak and Simpkins 2008). It is precisely within this context that one can understand the multi-vector model developed by Nazarbayev as a means of balancing external ties.

From this perspective, these alliances constitute the foundation of "solidary integration," whereby countries with particular objectives may converge around shared values that, beyond expressing a common horizon, result from strategic reflection oriented toward collective action (Puig 1987). This not only offers an important parallel for understanding how Kazakhstan positions itself within the CIS and the EAEU without relinquishing diplomatic agency in other multilateral forums, but also helps explain its moves toward Central Asian integration during the 1990s and, more recently, since 2017. Therefore, rather than being merely a response to the war in Ukraine, this behavior should be understood as structural and antecedent.

This situation can also be interpreted through Escudé's framework, which views alignment with the hegemonic power as a rational strategy of survival, provided that it does not undermine the state's economic interests (Escudé 1995). This perspective is useful for understanding Tokayev's decision to request CSTO military support in 2022, as well as Kazakhstan's continued membership in the EAEU even amid Western sanctions against Russia, decisions that may be read as the outcome of a rational cost-benefit calculation.

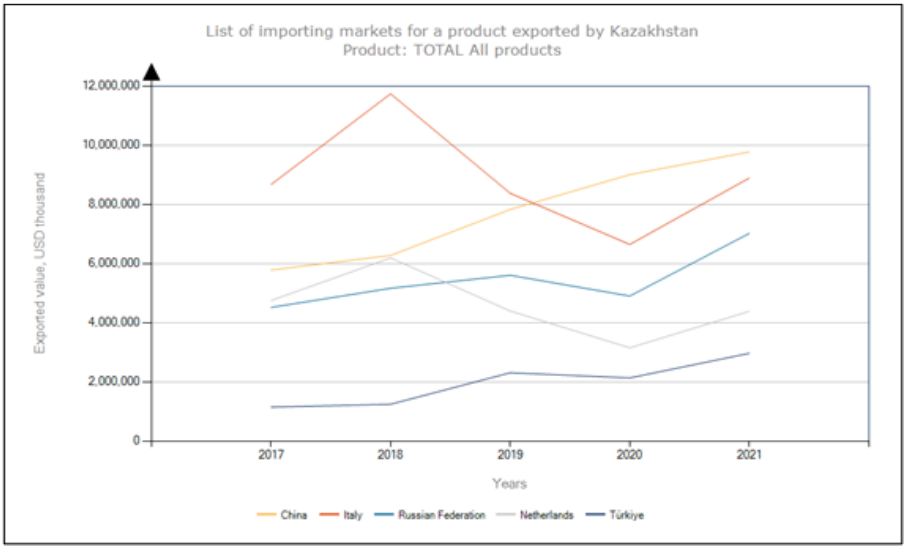
Indeed, an examination of Kazakhstan's economic indicators, measured through the import and export trade ratio between 2017 and 2021, suggests that, although exchanges with the Western bloc have persisted, Russia's presence in the country's trade balance remains significant. This is because, despite maintaining intense economic exchanges with Europe, Astana depends on neighboring infrastructure to export its hydrocarbons. Similarly, with regard to China, one observes a growing share as a destination for Kazakh products, especially commodities. As for intra-regional trade, despite recent advances, Kazakhstan still faces considerable opportunities, given that none of the Central Asian republics currently ranks among its top five trading partners (International Trade Center 2024).

Chart 1 – Main sources of Kazakhstan's imports (2017–2021)



Source: Trade Map, International Trade Center (ITC) (2024).

Chart 2 – Main destinations of Kazakhstan's exports (2017–2021)



Source: Trade Map, International Trade Center (ITC) (2024).

In other words, given the degree of economic interdependence and the disparity in power capabilities between the country and its major neighbors, potential Sino-Russian divergence highlights Kazakhstan's increasing adaptability in the face of evolving global dynamics. While its participation in the CIS, the EAEU, and the CSTO signals a historically rooted alliance with Russia, its role within the BRI reveals the maintenance of a balancing posture vis-à-vis China (Novikov and Bocharova 2023). Therefore, applying Puig's and Escudé's approaches in this case underscores not only the relevance of Latin American theoretical contributions beyond their region of origin, but also the existence of shared patterns across different global peripheries, such as the tension between pragmatism and sovereignty. Moreover, these contributions serve as a "theoretical bridge" for understanding the dynamics of international engagement in the twenty-first century, including in geographic areas that remain underexplored in academic production from the Global South.

When reflecting on Brazil through the Kazakh experience and through the lenses of Puig and Escudé, Astana's strategic multi-vectorism offers valuable insights for the contemporary global landscape, particularly in the context of the growing dispute between Washington and Beijing for political influence in Latin America. A first lesson derives from the pragmatism of maintaining an active balance among major centers of power, leveraging competition to

expand room for maneuver. For Brasília, this reinforces the importance of cultivating diversified partnerships, avoiding automatic alignments, and preserving space for autonomous decision-making, even within structures of economic interdependence. Kazakhstan's multi-vector approach demonstrates that, even under strong external pressures, it is possible to defend strategic interests (energy resources, regional security, and insertion into global value chains) without dramatically rupturing ties with established powers, an element historically inherent to Brazilian foreign policy (Cervo and Bueno 2011).

However, the key reflection drawn from this case suggests that Brazil should focus less on calibrating relations between China and the Western bloc (US/EU), and more on strengthening South-South and regional ties, using them as platforms for projection and bargaining. In other words, the central lesson lies in interpreting autonomy as an adaptive practice rather than as a dogma. Furthermore, considering the Kazakh experience, there is a warning regarding the need to anticipate certain vulnerabilities, such as external dependence, exposure to indirect sanctions, and the impact of geopolitical shocks. For Brazil, this translates not only into strengthening productive resilience and diversifying markets, but also into deepening South American integration and, above all, leveraging Brazil's role as a middle power capable of mediating peripheral interests, thus not merely reacting to the System, but also contributing to shaping it.

5. Conclusion

Although grounded in distinct intellectual traditions, Juan Carlos Puig and Carlos Escudé share a common starting point: that international politics is structured by hierarchies which impose severe constraints upon countries located in the global periphery. Their respective contributions to the debate on autonomy in International Relations, as developed within Latin American thought, therefore offer complementary pathways for understanding the strategic insertion of states with limited capabilities, such as Kazakhstan, within an adverse and constantly shifting international environment.

In Puig's framework (1980; 1984; 1987), theory begins from a structural diagnosis of dependency, in which autonomy is less an abstract ideal than a practical requirement for sovereign survival, understood as the state's capacity to act and decide according to its own interests even under conditions of asymmetry. The emphasis lies in exploiting the gaps within the international order, or, as he defines them, the system's margins of "permissiveness," in

order to expand the possibilities for external action (Puig 1987). His central contribution to this analysis lies in the notion of heterodox autonomy, a stage in which a peripheral country recognizes the leadership of great powers while acting strategically to preserve and expand its decision-making space without resorting to rupture. Kazakhstan, by adopting the so-called multi-vectorism, positioning itself in a balanced manner between Russia, China, Western powers, and other regional actors, appears to operate within this logic: it accepts the limits imposed by the system, yet seeks to navigate them with relative flexibility, relying on the multiplicity of ties to broaden its room for maneuver.

By contrast, Carlos Escudé's contribution points toward a different rationality. Within the framework of peripheral realism, Escudé (1995) starts from the premise that states should not measure autonomy in terms of an abstract freedom of choice, but rather through the concrete costs associated with their decisions. For him, directly confronting hegemonic powers is both costly and ineffective; instead, pragmatic alignment is preferable in issue-areas that do not compromise the state's vital interests, insofar as it enables the attainment of measurable material benefits for society (Escudé 1995). Although the regional project has not broadly reflected the integrationist vision elaborated by President Nazarbayev and, for some, reveals the continuity of Russian influence over national foreign policy (Troitskiy 2020; Mostafa and Mahmood 2018), its operationalization has ensured the free circulation of goods, services, capital, and labor across the region. Moreover, both the EAEU and the SCO have also served Kazakh interests by embedding Moscow within multilateral and consensus-based decision-making mechanisms, thereby constraining its actions, particularly in Central Asia.

Accordingly, Escudé's (1995) logic of autonomy as a cost-accounting calculation is useful for interpreting decisions such as Kazakhstan's request for CSTO intervention in 2022, or its decision to remain within the EAEU despite the tensions generated by the war in Ukraine. Far from representing mere submission, such actions may be read as part of a strategy aimed at preserving domestic stability and safeguarding fundamental economic channels, in line with what Escudé terms "*ciudadano-céntrica* rationality" (Escudé 1995).

Bringing these two frameworks to bear on the Kazakh case enables a more nuanced analysis of the international engagement of peripheral states. While Puig offers a lens through which to conceptualize agency and the strategic pursuit of autonomy under adverse conditions, Escudé draws attention to the limits and risks of such a pursuit, especially when it is not anchored in real capabilities. Both, however, reject the universalization of categories derived

from the mainstream and claim the need to theorize foreign policy from the peripheries, using concepts that are adequate to their historical and material realities. In this sense, the heuristic value of revisiting these approaches does not lie in direct comparison, but rather in recognizing shared structural patterns across distinct regions, reaffirming the analytical usefulness of applying Latin American theoretical frameworks to extra-regional contexts.

Thus, by shifting the focus toward an "other" periphery, one observes the recurrence of structural dilemmas, such as dependence on external powers and the persistent tension between stability and sovereignty, which, although manifesting at different intensities, invite the construction of a more robust and contextualized inter-peripheral theoretical repertoire. China's growing presence in both Latin America and Central Asia, combined with the intensification of Sino-American competition for influence on the geopolitical chessboard, further underscores the relevance of debates on the strategies of middle states vis-à-vis great powers. In other words, Kazakhstan's diplomatic pragmatism, albeit embedded in a different context, offers clues as to how countries of the Global South may leverage structural rivalries to expand their spaces of action without resorting to confrontational postures or unconditional alignment with one of the poles of power.

Given these similarities, such reflections also allow us to consider Brazil's potential in specific contexts. Does the country lack greater assertiveness in exploiting geopolitical spaces in which it could present itself as a "third alignment option," particularly for states seeking alternatives to the traditional axis of power? This gap becomes evident in Brazil's still timid presence in areas such as Central Asia, where ties with countries like Kazakhstan could open pathways for new energy, technological, and political partnerships. It is therefore worth asking: what prevents Brazil from mobilizing its credibility as a mediating actor, combined with the economic and diplomatic weight it possesses, to deepen relations with regions that, although distant, share similar dilemmas of sovereignty, stability, and international engagement?

Finally, this article has sought to demonstrate that the export of concepts "from the South to the South" should not be viewed as an exercise in uncritical transposition, but rather as an opportunity to enrich theory through cases that challenge its categories and reveal new possibilities for articulating dependency, autonomy, and strategy. It is, therefore, a matter of thinking international politics from the margins, and, in doing so, also reconfiguring the center of the debate.

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