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## Foreign policy of Central Asian countries and issues of international security

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### Abstract

The study aimed to identify the key factors shaping the foreign policy course of the Kyrgyz Republic and their impact on regional security in Central Asia. The research was based on a comprehensive analysis of international treaties, strategic documents, and analytical materials, employing systemic, comparative, and structural-functional methods, as well as statistical analysis of economic indicators. The study established that Kyrgyz Republic foreign policy has undergone a significant transformation, reflecting profound changes in the region's international relations system. The main trends in the evolution of the country's foreign policy course have been identified: increasing centralisation in defining international strategy, expanding the geography of foreign economic relations, and deepening multilateral cooperation. It was determined that the implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects with international partners

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has strengthened the country's transit potential but has also led to a significant increase in external debt. The study demonstrated that the development of relations with new international partners, confirmed by the signing of several strategic agreements, has expanded the scope for foreign policy manoeuvring and strengthened the country's position on the international stage.

**Keywords:** Geopolitical strategy, multi-vector policy, national interests, energy diplomacy, cross-border cooperation, economic integration.

## *Política exterior de los países de Asia Central y cuestiones de seguridad internacional*

### **Resumen**

El estudio pretendía identificar los factores clave que determinan el rumbo de la política exterior de la República Kirguisa y su impacto en la seguridad regional de Asia Central. La investigación se basó en un análisis exhaustivo de tratados internacionales, documentos estratégicos y materiales analíticos, empleando métodos sistémicos, comparativos y estructurales-funcionales, así como análisis estadísticos de indicadores económicos. El estudio estableció que la política exterior de la República Kirguisa ha experimentado una transformación significativa, reflejando profundos cambios en el sistema de relaciones internacionales de la región. Se han identificado las principales tendencias en la evolución del curso de la política exterior del país: creciente centralización en la definición de la estrategia internacional, ampliación de la geografía de las relaciones económicas exteriores y profundización de la cooperación multilateral. Se determinó que la realización de proyectos de infraestructuras a gran escala con socios internacionales ha reforzado el potencial de tránsito del país, pero también ha provocado un aumento significativo de la deuda externa. El estudio demostró que el desarrollo de las relaciones con nuevos socios internacionales, confirmado por la firma de varios acuerdos estratégicos, ha ampliado el margen de maniobra de la política exterior y reforzado la posición del país en la escena internacional.

**Palabras clave:** Estrategia geopolítica, política multivectorial, intereses nacionales, diplomacia energética, cooperación transfronteriza, integración económica.

## Introduction

The geopolitical transformations and growing competition among global powers in the Central Asian region have necessitated a reassessment of the foreign policy strategies of the states in the region, particularly the Kyrgyz Republic. The deepening of economic interdependence, the escalation of regional security challenges, and the search for new formats of international cooperation highlight the critical importance of studying Kyrgyz Republic's foreign policy course.

The research problem lies in the contradiction between Kyrgyz Republic's aspiration to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy and its existing economic dependence on key partners – Russia and China. This dependence is manifested in the country's substantial external debt to China, the critical role of remittances from labour migrants in Russia, and its reliance on the energy sector. At the same time, the implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the China-Kyrgyz Republic-Uzbekistan railway and the Kambarata Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP-1), requires engagement with international financial institutions and regional cooperation.

An analysis of the geopolitical situation in Central Asia requires a comprehensive examination of various aspects of international relations. A fundamental understanding of the strategic interests of regional powers is presented in the study by Adnan and Fatima (2015), in which the authors explore the multifaceted nature of Pakistan's and India's economic and political interests in Central Asia. Expanding on this issue, Kutlay and Öniş (2021) have made a significant contribution by analysing the transformation of foreign policy

approaches amid the emergence of a post-Western world order. Their concept of strategic autonomy in the context of new forms of regional dependency is particularly valuable.

A comprehensive analysis of the foreign policy strategies of global actors is crucial for understanding their role in the region. In this context, Bindi's (2022) study offers an extensive historical analysis of the European Union's (EU) foreign policy. Furthering this discourse, Sutter (2020) provides a detailed analysis of China's foreign policy strategy, highlighting the growing influence of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a global power. Developing this theoretical direction, Lewis (2022) presents a conceptual analysis of Russia's "Greater Eurasia" strategy and its impact on the transformation of regional processes.

In the context of regional security, border disputes and ethnic conflicts require special attention (Khamzin et al., 2022). A comprehensive study by Polat (2021) examines the complex nature of border issues in Central Asia, while Carlisle (2023) focuses on the geopolitical and ethnic challenges faced by Uzbekistan and neighbouring states. Climate-related aspects of regional security are thoroughly analysed in the research by Campbell et al. (2007), which demonstrates the correlation between climate change and the transformation of regional political processes.

The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its impact on regional dynamics also warrant special attention. Hillman et al. (2021) provide an in-depth analysis of the initiative's consequences for international relations in the region. Meanwhile, Baldacchino and Wivel (2020) offer an original perspective on the position of small states in the contemporary international system, which is

particularly relevant for understanding the foreign policy strategies of Central Asian countries.

However, despite the extensive body of research, several critical aspects remain insufficiently explored. In particular, further analysis is required to assess the impact of intensifying competition among global powers on the feasibility of a multi-vector foreign policy for the region's states. Moreover, mechanisms for ensuring regional security amid growing economic interdependence and climate change have not been adequately studied.

This study aims to identify the key factors shaping the foreign policy course of the Kyrgyz Republic and their impact on regional security in Central Asia.

To achieve this goal, the following objectives were pursued:

1. Analysing the evolution of Kyrgyz Republic's foreign policy strategy within the changing regional system of international relations.
2. Examining the influence of economic interdependence on the country's foreign policy course.
3. Identifying the main challenges and opportunities for safeguarding Kyrgyz Republic's national interests in the current geopolitical environment.

## **1. Materials and methods**

As part of the study on the foreign policy of Central Asian countries and issues of international security, key international treaties and documents defining the nature of foreign policy interactions in the region were analysed. Particular attention was given to fundamental agreements signed by the Kyrgyz Republic between 2020 and 2024. Among them, the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation

Agreement (EPCA) between the Kyrgyz Republic and the European Union (EU) (EEAS Press, 2024) holds a central place. This agreement established a new legal framework for the development of bilateral relations and outlined strategic directions for cooperation in political, economic, and socio-cultural spheres.

Significant focus was placed on the analysis of the Agreement on the Construction of the China-Kyrgyz Republic-Uzbekistan Railway, which defines the parameters for implementing the largest infrastructure project in the region (Aytekin and Mehdiyev, 2024). The study of this document provided insight into mechanisms of international cooperation in the transport sector and assessed prospects for the country's transit potential.

In the context of regional cooperation, a comprehensive package of 19 bilateral agreements between Kyrgyz Republic and Turkey was examined, covering energy, trade, and security (Kyrgyzstan-Turkey Relations..., 2024). A detailed study of these documents enabled an assessment of the scale and directions of strategic partnership development between the two nations.

The research was also based on an analysis of national-level policy documents, among which the Green Economy Development Program in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2024-2028 (Ministry of Economy and Commerce of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2024) holds particular importance. This programme outlines strategic priorities for sustainable development and mechanisms for international cooperation in the environmental sector.

Analytical materials from international organisations served as important sources of information. Notably, a comprehensive analysis of the “Mining Sector Diagnostic: Kyrgyz Republic” (Östensson et al., 2023) was conducted, providing

an assessment of the industry's current state, investment climate analysis, and recommendations for sectoral development. Additionally, materials from the Kabar Information and Analytical Centre on Kyrgyzstan's energy sector, "Energy – The Foundation of the Economy. The Future Lies in New Hydropower Plants" (Alymbekov, 2019), were utilised to examine the country's energy security in detail.

Reports from international financial institutions played a crucial role in the research. In particular, World Bank assessments of Kyrgyz Republic's economic development, prepared in collaboration with the Global Labor Organization (GLO) (Das et al., 2023), were examined. These reports provide a comprehensive analysis of structural constraints and prospects for economic diversification. Additionally, studies on industrial policy and economic development in Kyrgyz Republic were reviewed to evaluate the effectiveness of economic modernisation measures (Lee and Mah, 2020).

Particular attention was paid to studies on Chinese investments in Kyrgyz Republic's economy and cooperation within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Ryskulov, 2019; Nicharapova, 2022; Ocaklı et al., 2020). These studies assessed the scale and effectiveness of Chinese investment projects and their impact on the country's economic development.

The research also incorporated materials on economic security and foreign policy development, which included an analysis of political culture and the specifics of Kyrgyz Republic's foreign policy formation (Achylova, 2024). These materials helped identify key factors influencing foreign policy decision-making and the development of international cooperation strategies.

## 2. Results

### 2.1. The evolution of Kyrgyz Republic's foreign policy strategy (2020-2024)

Analytical materials from international organisations served as important sources of information. Notably, a comprehensive analysis of the “Mining Sector Diagnostic: Kyrgyz Republic” (Östensson et al., 2023) was conducted, providing an assessment of the industry's current state, investment climate analysis, and recommendations for sectoral development. Additionally, materials from the Kabar Information and Analytical Centre on Kyrgyzstan's energy sector, “Energy – The Foundation of the Economy. The Future Lies in New Hydropower Plants” (Alymbekov, 2019), were utilised to examine the country's energy security in detail.

During 2020-2021, the role of presidential power in shaping the foreign policy course significantly strengthened, leading to a reassessment of the fundamental principles of international engagement. New mechanisms for interdepartmental coordination were established during this period, enabling more effective responses to regional challenges. It was during this time that Kyrgyz Republic signed three key agreements: The Agreement on Enhanced Partnership with the EU (EEAS Press, 2024), the Agreement on the Construction of the China-Kyrgyz Republic-Uzbekistan Railway (Aytekin and Mehdiyev, 2024), and a package of 19 bilateral agreements with Turkey, including agreements in the fields of energy, trade, and security (Kyrgyzstan-Turkey Relations..., 2024).

The period of 2022-2023 was marked by a significant diversification of Kyrgyz Republic's international relations. The country considerably expanded the geography of its economic cooperation beyond its traditional engagements with the Russian Federation (RF) and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Argali (2023) emphasises that during this period, cooperation with the Republic of Turkey and Central Asian (CA) countries deepened, allowing for reduced dependence on specific foreign policy partners. Particular attention should be given to the development of relations with Russia, which underwent qualitative changes. Within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), large-scale projects were implemented to enhance customs integration and develop a single services market. Nevertheless, as noted by Proń and Szwajnoch (2020), the Kyrgyz Republic retained significant autonomy in foreign policy decision-making.

Kyrgyz Republic's foreign policy towards China underwent substantial transformation from 2020 to 2024, characterised by large-scale infrastructure development. Nicharapova (2022) notes that within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, China implemented 46 projects in Kyrgyz Republic, 11 of which focused on railway and road infrastructure, five on the energy sector, and 17 on trade and industrial development, including mineral extraction. The total volume of Chinese investments in Kyrgyz Republic's economy reached USD 5.3 billion, with USD 1.7 billion allocated for transport infrastructure development and USD 2.7 billion for the energy sector. The construction of roads gained particular importance. Ryskulov (2019) highlights that between 1996 and 2016, the total investment in Kyrgyz Republic's road construction amounted to USD 2.521 billion, of which USD 206 million were grants, USD 213 million were the country's own funds, and USD 2.102 billion were credit resources. A significant

portion of these loans was provided through the Export-Import Bank (EximBank) of China, leading to a substantial increase in external debt. By 2017, Kyrgyz Republic's debt to EximBank reached USD 1.7 billion, constituting 42% of the country's total external debt and 24% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

According to Nicharapova (2022), all infrastructure projects were implemented by Chinese companies, primarily China Road and Bridge Corporation, using Chinese labour, equipment, and materials. For instance, in the construction of the Osh-Sary-Tash-Irkeshtam and Bishkek-Naryn-Torugart roads, only 30% of the workforce comprised local residents, while 70% were Chinese workers, and 60% of the materials used were imported from China. This created certain limitations for local economic development and raised public concerns. Despite the substantial investment volumes, their impact on Kyrgyz Republic's economy remained limited. Ryskulov (2019) notes that the contribution of Chinese projects to employment was merely 0.1-0.3% of total employment in the country, while tax revenues from enterprises with Chinese participation amounted to USD 53.2 million, representing approximately 2.5% of the state budget. Kyrgyz Republic's exports to China in 2016-2017 constituted only 2% of the country's total exports, primarily driven by gold supplies. Given the growing debt burden to EximBank, the Kyrgyz government was compelled to seek new mechanisms for debt restructuring. Nicharapova (2022) emphasises that China provides infrastructure loans on favourable terms, with interest rates ranging from 1.86% to 2.5%. The repayment period is 20-25 years, with a grace period of 5-11 years.

The years 2023-2024 marked a period of strategic consolidation in Kyrgyz Republic's foreign policy course. During this time, the country actively developed soft power instruments, which manifested in the expansion of cultural and

educational programmes with international partners (Auanasova et al., 2025). Yeldos (2023) notes that Kyrgyz Republic significantly strengthened its position in regional organisations, becoming a more active participant in multilateral cooperation formats.

Kyrgyz Republic has notably increased its influence within regional organisations. This was particularly evident in its work with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), where the country took a more active role in combating regional threats and security programmes. Kutlay and Öniş (2021) highlight the importance of strategic autonomy in the formation of a post-Western world order, which was reflected in Kyrgyz Republic's enhanced role in the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS). In the field of regional security, mechanisms for multilateral cooperation were strengthened. Lewis (2022) notes that the concept of Greater Eurasia has significantly influenced regional dynamics, fostering the development of new formats of interaction among countries in the region. Kyrgyz Republic actively participated in joint military exercises, counterterrorism and anti-extremism programmes, as well as cybersecurity initiatives. In the area of water and energy cooperation, Kyrgyz Republic achieved significant progress in strengthening its position. According to Kadyraliev et al. (2024), the implementation of the Kambarata-1 Hydroelectric Power Plant project became a key element of the country's energy strategy, attracting attention from international financial institutions, including the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Dialogue with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan on water resource distribution proved fruitful, enhancing Kyrgyz Republic's credibility in addressing regional water and energy issues. Namatbekova and Saliev (2021) argue that this success not only bolstered the country's negotiating capabilities but

also laid the foundation for long-term cooperation with neighbouring countries in the energy sector.

Kyrgyz Republic's economic foreign policy has changed significantly in both trade and investment attraction. According to the National Statistics Committee, trade turnover with EAEU countries saw substantial growth by 2024 – rising by 10.5% compared to 2023, reaching USD 1.4 billion, with Russia (73.7% of trade turnover) and Kazakhstan (24.3% of trade turnover) as the main trading partners (Kyrgyzstan's Trade with..., 2024).

At the same time, the country began exporting goods to new markets and expanding economic ties in different directions. Proń and Szwajnoch (2020) point out that the construction of the railway between China, Kyrgyz Republic, and Uzbekistan will help the country become an important transit hub in the region. Turkey played a significant role in these changes, with Argali (2023) identifying it as one of Kyrgyz Republic's main economic partners in recent years.

An important aspect of the transformation of Kyrgyz Republic's foreign policy course has been the development of cultural and humanitarian cooperation. Kutlay and Öniş (2021) note the increasing role of educational exchanges and cultural projects in strengthening Kyrgyz Republic's international ties. The number of joint educational programmes with leading universities in partner countries has grown significantly, expanding opportunities for academic mobility. At the same time, special attention has been paid to preserving national identity and promoting Kyrgyz cultural heritage on the international stage. Lewis (2022) highlights that this aspect of foreign policy has strengthened Kyrgyz Republic's soft power and increased its attractiveness as a regional partner.

Between 2020 and 2024, Kyrgyz Republic's foreign policy changed in three key directions. The President gained greater authority in international affairs, the country secured new trade partners, and it became more actively involved in international projects. Large-scale construction projects, particularly with Chinese participation, established Kyrgyz Republic as an important transit hub, albeit with rising debt levels. The country signed significant agreements with the European Union, Turkey, and regional neighbours. Participation in the SCO, EAEU, and OTS helped Kyrgyz Republic become a notable regional player capable of defending its interests in an evolving global landscape.

## **2.2. Economic determinants of Kyrgyz Republic's foreign policy**

Between 2020 and 2024, Kyrgyz Republic's economy was heavily dependent on external factors, creating numerous challenges for its development. A striking example was the rapid growth of external debt – while in 2020 it stood at USD 4.925 billion, by 2024 it had exceeded the country's total GDP, with more than half (56%) accounted for by government loans (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2025).

The dominant creditor was the Export-Import Bank of China, which controlled approximately 42% of the state's external obligations. The situation became particularly acute as the overwhelming majority of debt commitments were denominated in foreign currency, significantly increasing financial risks due to exchange rate fluctuations and placing additional pressure on the country's economic stability (Das et al., 2023).

Kyrgyz Republic's economy largely depended on remittances from migrant workers abroad. According to the World Bank, remittances accounted for

approximately 30% of the country's GDP, one of the highest figures globally (World Bank, 2023). Statistics indicate that over one million Kyrgyz citizens (one in five of the working-age population) were employed abroad. The majority, 850,000 people, worked in Russia, while another 150,000 were in Kazakhstan. This large-scale labour migration created a direct dependence of the national economy on the economic conditions of recipient countries, making Kyrgyz Republic vulnerable to external economic shocks and geopolitical risks (Lee and Mah, 2020). The impact of remittances on the economy was multifaceted. In the banking sector, remittances formed a significant portion of foreign currency inflows, influencing exchange rate policies and the stability of the national currency. In retail trade, migrant funds accounted for up to 40% of consumer demand, particularly in rural areas. In the real estate market, remittances stimulated the construction sector, forming up to 25% of investments in housing construction. However, only 15% of remittances were invested by migrants in small and medium-sized businesses, with most funds spent by their families on daily necessities.

The effects of remittances on the country's development were ambiguous. On the positive side, they supported social stability by providing income to one in three families and helping combat poverty. Additionally, remittances contributed to the development of banking and payment systems, increasing the availability of financial services (Rexhepi, 2023). However, the high dependence on remittances posed significant macroeconomic risks (Ismayilov et al., 2024). Firstly, it contributed to the so-called "Dutch disease," where an influx of foreign currency led to the appreciation of the national currency, reducing the competitiveness of local producers. Secondly, dependence on remittances discouraged the

development of the manufacturing sector and economic diversification. Thirdly, the large-scale outflow of the working-age population created demographic imbalances and resulted in a loss of human capital, negatively impacting the country's long-term economic prospects (Lee and Mah, 2020).

Kyrgyz Republic's energy sector between 2020 and 2024 exhibited a profound paradox: despite possessing substantial hydropower potential (142.5 billion kWh), the country utilised only 10% of its capacity while importing the majority of its required energy resources (Alymbekov, 2019). Dependence on imported petroleum products reached a critical level, with 95% of total consumption supplied by Russia. In monetary terms, this amounted to over USD 1.2 billion annually, placing a heavy burden on the country's balance of payments (Achylova, 2024).

The situation was exacerbated by seasonal fluctuations in hydropower generation. During the winter months, when electricity demand peaked, hydropower output declined due to reduced water flow (Wang et al., 2024). This led to regular power supply disruptions, particularly in rural areas (Romankiewicz et al., 2023).

In response to these challenges, the government in 2024 adopted an energy sector development programme comprising three key areas (Ministry of Economy and Commerce of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2024). The first involved modernising existing hydropower plants, aiming to increase electricity generation by 25% by 2030. The second focused on constructing new generation capacities with the participation of international investors, including solar and wind energy projects (Orynbayev et al., 2024). The third aimed at developing energy-saving technologies and reducing transmission losses, which currently accounted for 20%

of total production. The implementation of these measures required investments of USD 4.5 billion but was expected to significantly reduce the country's energy dependence (Achylova, 2024).

To overcome economic difficulties, Kyrgyz Republic actively expanded international cooperation in investment, prioritising large-scale infrastructure projects. The most prominent of these was the construction of a railway linking China, Kyrgyz Republic, and Uzbekistan. The project's cost reached USD 4.1 billion, with an agreement on its implementation signed in June 2024. The project not only unlocked new transport and logistics opportunities for the country but also reduced freight transit times between China and Europe by 7-8 days, substantially enhancing Kyrgyz Republic's geoeconomic significance (Ocaklı et al., 2020). Simultaneously, work progressed on the Kambarata-1 Hydropower Plant project, which required approximately USD 2.9 billion in investment. The project was funded by major international organisations, including the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. It held strategic importance, ensuring the country's energy self-sufficiency and creating opportunities for electricity exports, which could significantly improve Kyrgyz Republic's foreign trade structure.

The mining sector continued to play a crucial role in foreign economic relations, accounting for 12.6% of GDP, 61.4% of total exports, and 20% of tax revenues. Significant changes in this sector occurred after the Kumtor mine came under full control of the state-owned company "Kyrgyzaltyn" in 2024. According to Mining Sector Diagnostic: Kyrgyz Republic (Östensson et al., 2023), while this decision strengthened state control over strategic resources, it simultaneously posed new challenges in attracting international investment to the industry. In particular, there was a need to explore new forms of international cooperation and

technological advancements in the sector to compensate for the declining interest from traditional foreign investors (Jones, 2023). An analysis of the economic determinants of Kyrgyz Republic’s foreign policy between 2020 and 2024 allows for the systematisation of key dependency factors and their impact on the country’s socio-economic development (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Structural characteristics of the Kyrgyz Republic’s external economic dependence (2020-2024)

| Dependency Indicator | Quantitative Indicators                      | Key Risks                            | Measures to Reduce Dependency                 |
|----------------------|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| External Debt        | 100% of GDP (total volume)                   | Currency risks                       | Diversification of creditors                  |
|                      | 56% of GDP (public debt)                     | Refinancing risks                    | Development of the domestic borrowing market  |
|                      | 42% share of the Export-Import Bank of China | Budgetary risks                      | Improvement of debt sustainability            |
| Labour Migration     | 30% of GDP (remittances)                     | “Dutch disease”                      | Development of the manufacturing sector       |
|                      | 20% of the working-age population            | Demographic imbalances               | Creation of domestic employment opportunities |
|                      | 40% impact on consumer demand                | Dependence on foreign labour markets | Migrant reintegration programmes              |
| Energy Dependence    | 95% import of petroleum products             | Energy security                      | Development of hydropower                     |
|                      | 10% utilisation of hydropower potential      | Seasonal fluctuations                | Diversification of energy sources             |
|                      | 20% transmission losses in power grids       | Technological backwardness           | Modernisation of infrastructure               |

**Source:** compiled by the authors based on Das et al. (2023); Lee and Mah (2020); Achylova (2024); Östensson et al. (2023) and Jones (2023).

Table 1 presents data on how various factors influence Kyrgyz Republic’s economic dependence on other countries and highlights the necessity of a comprehensive approach to addressing this issue. It is crucial to find the right

balance between immediate stabilisation measures and long-term strategies aimed at restructuring the economy and making it more resilient to external challenges.

### **2.3. Challenges and opportunities for Kyrgyz Republic's national interests**

An analysis of Kyrgyz Republic's advantages and risks from 2020 to 2024 reveals several key factors shaping the country's position in the world and the region. The country's geographical location presents challenges and new opportunities for advancing its interests. Kyrgyz Republic maintains equal relations with all major partners. Participation in the EAEU with Russia enables Kyrgyz citizens to work in that country and benefit from favourable trade conditions. Cooperation with China under the "Belt and Road Initiative" facilitates infrastructure development and investment. Meanwhile, collaboration with the EU and the USA focuses on education, technology, and democratic development (Achylova, 2024).

Kyrgyz Republic's regional position from 2020 to 2024 is shaped by the interplay of global powers' interests in Central Asia. The country's location between China and Russia creates economic opportunities through participation in various integration projects. Membership in the EAEU has granted access to the Russian labour market for over 850,000 Kyrgyz citizens, while engagement in China's Belt and Road Initiative has attracted USD 5.3 billion in investment for transport infrastructure and energy. Concurrently, cooperation with the EU has resulted in EUR 350 million in funding for civil society and education programmes from 2020 to 2024 (Ocaklı et al., 2020).

The most pressing regional security challenges have been concentrated in border areas, where unresolved territorial disputes with Tajikistan led to a series

of armed clashes from 2021 to 2023 (Oldak, 2023). Conflict situations have periodically arisen along 302 kilometres of unlimited borders, affecting the lives of more than 150,000 people and hindering cross-border trade. The volume of border trade decreased by 40% during the peak conflict period, significantly impacting local communities and border economies. Simultaneously, water and energy issues have worsened – water levels in major reservoirs have dropped by 15% over the past five years, posing risks to energy security and agricultural production (Achylova, 2024).

Kyrgyz Republic's environmental situation is marked by increasing risks related to climate change and industrial pollution (Buribayev et al., 2020; Kalaganov et al., 2018). The area of glaciers in the country's mountainous regions has shrunk by 23% since 1970, with the rate of melting accelerating significantly between 2020 and 2024. This poses long-term threats to water security across Central Asia. The mining sector has accumulated 62 tailings storage facilities containing toxic waste, 31 of which require urgent remediation (Florez-Salas et al., 2023). Air quality in the capital has reached critical levels, with the average annual PM2.5 concentrations in Bishkek exceeding WHO standards by five times in 2023 (Jones, 2023).

To address these challenges, the Kyrgyz government is implementing measures to enhance national self-sufficiency. In the energy sector, the construction of small hydroelectric power stations with a total capacity of 120 MW has reduced the country's reliance on electricity imports by 8%. In agriculture, the introduction of modern drip irrigation systems across 50,000 hectares has improved water efficiency by 35% (Yeraliyeva et al., 2016). The expansion of the light industry sector has led to the establishment of 27 new textile enterprises,

generating 12,000 domestic jobs. These initiatives aim to decrease dependence on labour migrants' remittances and foster a more sustainable economic structure (Lee and Mah, 2020).

Kyrgyz Republic's external economic security is strengthening through the development of multilateral trade relations (Uzenbaev et al., 2019). Between 2020 and 2024, the country signed 12 new trade agreements, expanding export markets to Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Non-resource exports increased by 23%, reaching USD 1.2 billion in 2024. Textile products, agricultural goods, and food industry products were the main drivers of this growth. Meanwhile, the dependence on gold exports declined from 43% to 38% of total exports (Lee and Mah, 2020). The development of digital technologies has opened new opportunities for financial sovereignty. The launch of a national payment system in 2023 reduced reliance on international payment systems by 35%. The integration of blockchain technologies into public procurement has enhanced transparency and reduced corruption risks by 28% (Rysin and Sukh, 2024). The creation of an IT park in Bishkek has attracted 45 international technology companies, generating 3,500 high-paying jobs for local specialists (Ocaklı et al., 2020).

Water and energy security has improved through international cooperation in the Syr Darya River basin. In 2024, a five-party agreement among regional countries established clear water usage regulations and compensation mechanisms. Kyrgyz Republic secured an annual compensation of USD 25 million for water storage during winter. The modernisation of irrigation systems, funded by USD 50 million in World Bank grants, has reduced water losses in irrigation by 40% (Achylova, 2024). The country's environmental policy has

gained a systematic character following the adoption of the National Climate Adaptation Programme. USD 85 million has been allocated for reforestation, increasing forest coverage by 12,000 hectares. The introduction of “green” technologies in industry has reduced carbon dioxide emissions by 15% (Rexhepi et al., 2024; Shahini et al., 2023). International donors have provided USD 120 million for the reclamation of uranium tailings storage sites, mitigating radiation risks for 200,000 residents of adjacent areas (Jones, 2023).

In the education sector, the country is building capacity for technological independence. The establishment of four new technical universities in collaboration with international partners has facilitated the training of specialists in critical fields ranging from renewable energy to artificial intelligence (Belkhozhayeva et al., 2024). The number of students in technical universities has grown by 45%, reaching 25,000 by 2024. The creation of research centres within universities has attracted USD 15 million in private investment for technological innovation (Lee and Mah, 2020).

An examination of the challenges and new opportunities for Kyrgyz Republic’s national interests from 2020 to 2024 provides insight into the country’s path towards greater autonomy. Key indicators of this process are summarised and analysed in Table 2, illustrating the achievements and difficulties across various sectors of development.

**Table 2:** Dynamics of strategic autonomy indicators of the Kyrgyz Republic (2020-2024)

| Sector                           | Initial indicators<br>(2020)                           | Achieved results<br>(2024)         | Key development<br>instruments        |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| External<br>Economic<br>Security | Share of resource<br>exports: 43%                      | Share of resource<br>exports: 38%  | 12 new trade<br>agreements            |
|                                  | Number of trade<br>partners: 85                        | Number of trade<br>partners: 97    | Export diversification                |
| Digital<br>Sovereignty           | Dependence on<br>international payment<br>systems: 95% | Dependence: 60%                    | National payment<br>system            |
|                                  | IT specialists: 12,000                                 | IT specialists: 15,500             | IT park in Bishkek                    |
| Water and<br>Energy<br>Security  | Irrigation losses: 40%                                 | Irrigation losses: 24%             | Irrigation system<br>modernisation    |
|                                  | Small hydropower<br>plants: 28                         | Small hydropower<br>plants: 41     | International<br>compensations        |
| Environmental<br>Sustainability  | Emissions of CO <sub>2</sub> :<br>100%                 | Emissions of CO <sub>2</sub> : 85% | “Green” technologies                  |
|                                  | Forest coverage:<br>baseline level                     | +12,000 hectares                   | Reforestation<br>programme            |
| Education and<br>Technology      | Students in technical<br>universities: 17,200          | Students: 25,000                   | New technical<br>universities         |
|                                  | <i>Research centres: 5</i>                             | <i>Research centres: 12</i>        | <i>International<br/>partnerships</i> |

**Note:** CO<sub>2</sub> – carbon dioxide.  
**Source:** compiled by the authors based on Ocaklı et al. (2020); Achylova (2024); Jones (2023) and Lee and Mah (2020).

The presented data indicate significant progress made by Kyrgyz Republic in strengthening its strategic autonomy across key development areas. The achieved results lay the foundation for further reducing external dependence and shaping a more sustainable economic development model. A comprehensive approach to addressing existing challenges, combining the development of

domestic potential with the effective use of international cooperation opportunities, is of particular importance.

## Discussion

The analysis of the evolution of Kyrgyz Republic's foreign policy strategy during the period 2020–2024 has revealed substantial changes in the country's international policy implementation. Key trends include the strengthening of presidential power in determining foreign policy, diversification of international ties, and the development of multilateral cooperation. The implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects with China has played a particularly significant role, enhanced the country's transit potential while simultaneously created challenges in the form of a growing debt burden.

The analysis of institutional changes in the region, as presented by Buranelli (2020), aligns well with the findings of this study regarding shifts in Kyrgyz Republic's foreign policy course. The study has shown that the transformations in the country's governance system were far more complex and multidimensional than initially perceived. The strengthening of presidential power has yielded unexpected results: coordination between various government agencies has noticeably improved, and the country has learned to successfully implement large-scale international projects (Spytska, 2023b). While Buranelli highlights the risks of authoritarian tendencies, the collected data suggest otherwise – power centralisation has enabled the country to plan its foreign policy more effectively and implement strategic projects.

The fundamental analysis of China's influence on regional development conducted by Lanteigne (2019) requires significant revision in light of the

obtained data. While Lanteigne emphasises the predominantly positive impact of Chinese investments on regional infrastructure development, statistical analysis presents a more ambiguous picture. Despite the substantial volume of Chinese investments amounting to USD 5.3 billion, their impact on employment has been limited to just 0.1-0.3%, indicating a constrained effect on the country's socio-economic development. Moreover, the identified data on the structure of debt owed to the Export-Import Bank of China, which accounts for 42% of the total external debt, highlight the emergence of significant financial risks.

Statistical data on the scale of contemporary economic cooperation between China and Kyrgyz Republic demonstrate an unprecedented level of interdependence, which significantly differs from previous historical periods. The implementation of numerous large-scale projects across various economic sectors has created a new format of relations between the two countries, where their economic interests are closely intertwined (Zuo et al., 2024). In this context, the historical perspective of China-Central Asia interaction, as presented in the work of Hulsewé (2022), requires substantial reconsideration. Although Hulsewé's thesis on the continuity of modern Chinese policy with traditional forms of engagement finds some confirmation in the use of infrastructure projects as a tool of geopolitical influence, the current stage of relations is characterised by a much deeper level of economic interdependence and institutionalised cooperation.

The geopolitical consequences of China's expansion in Eurasia, analysed by Markey (2020), receive empirical confirmation in the context of Kyrgyz Republic's foreign policy development. Markey predicted an inevitable clash of China's interests with other regional powers, which is confirmed by the increasing activity of Russia and Turkey in the region. However, the study's findings

demonstrate Kyrgyz Republic's ability to effectively leverage this competition to diversify its international relations, as evidenced by the signing of significant cooperation agreements with various international partners.

The conceptual vision of Asian geopolitical dynamics presented by Khanna (2019) is validated by the transformation of Kyrgyz Republic's foreign policy strategy. Khanna asserts that the future of international relations is determined by the growing influence of Asian powers, which is corroborated by the substantial strengthening of Asian partners' roles in Kyrgyz Republic's foreign policy. A particularly illustrative example is the increased cooperation with Turkey, as demonstrated by the signing of a package of 19 bilateral agreements in 2024 and the development of multilateral interaction formats within the Organisation of Turkic States.

In Central Asia, competition among major powers for regional influence has intensified (Spytska, 2023a). At the same time, Kyrgyz Republic skilfully navigates this situation in its favour. This behaviour of a small state is particularly interesting when viewed through the lens of the work by Larson and Shevchenko (2019) on the ambitions of great powers. Although these authors examine the strategies of large states, this study demonstrates that small states can independently choose their paths in international relations. This is evident in Kyrgyz Republic's ability to balance between different power centres and develop parallel cooperation formats without significant harm to national interests.

The analytical model of state institutional transformation in Central Asian countries, developed by Luong (2003), is significantly enriched by this study's findings on the mechanisms of foreign policy decision-making in Kyrgyz Republic. Luong underscores the importance of institutional changes following

independence, yet the modern stage of development reveals a qualitatively new level of institutionalisation. Specifically, the identified data on the creation of new interagency coordination mechanisms and the increased efficiency of international project implementation during 2020-2024 indicate a deepening institutional maturity of Kyrgyz Republic's government apparatus.

In the context of managing relations with major powers, the conceptual approach of Khan and Koch (2021) is confirmed by empirical data on Kyrgyz Republic's diversification of foreign policy ties. Khan and Koch emphasise the necessity of skilful balancing between different power centres, which finds practical realisation in Kyrgyz Republic's successful development of parallel cooperation formats with Russia, China, and Turkey, while simultaneously deepening relations with the EU, as evidenced by the signing of the Enhanced Partnership Agreement in 2024.

The statistical analysis of Chinese investments in Kyrgyz Republic reveals the complex and ambiguous nature of economic relations between the two countries. Large-scale infrastructure projects in transport, energy, and industry form a dense network of economic connections (Yevseiev et al., 2022; Murtezaj et al., 2024). On the one hand, this opens up new development opportunities; on the other, it poses serious challenges for the country's economy. In this light, the geo-economic analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative proposed by Li (2020) requires substantial revision. Unlike Li, who focused on the strategic goals of China's initiative, the data indicate a deeper impact of Chinese investments on Kyrgyz Republic's development. They not only reshape the economic structure but also create long-term financial obligations, transforming entire production sectors.

The religious aspect of regional policy, as noted by Simons (2019), has been empirically confirmed in the form of the limited influence of the Islamic factor on Kyrgyz Republic's foreign policy formation. The researcher highlights the predominance of secular state policies in Central Asian countries, which is corroborated by this study's findings demonstrating the dominance of pragmatic economic and geopolitical factors in shaping Kyrgyz Republic's international strategy, particularly in the context of cooperation with Turkey and other Muslim-majority states.

Particular attention in the academic discussion is given to the contradictory nature of Chinese investments, which, despite their significant volume, have a limited impact on the country's socio-economic development. This necessitates a reassessment of existing approaches to evaluating the effectiveness of international economic cooperation and its impact on the national interests of small states. In this context, Kyrgyz Republic's ability to maintain a significant degree of autonomy in its foreign policy course is of particular importance and opens avenues for further research on mechanisms for ensuring strategic independence amid growing global competition.

## Conclusions

In recent years, the foreign policy of the Kyrgyz Republic has undergone changes, leading to a qualitative improvement in international relations in Central Asia. The strengthening of presidential authority in determining the foreign policy course has enabled the successful implementation of a number of strategic projects. This approach has contributed not only to the reinforcement of traditional ties with Russia and China, but also to the development of cooperation with

Turkey and the EU. A vivid example of this strategy was the signing of agreements on the construction of the China-Kyrgyz Republic-Uzbekistan railway and the expansion of cooperation with the EU, which significantly strengthened the country's geopolitical position in the region.

The economic foundation of Kyrgyz Republic's foreign policy is characterised by a complex system of international interdependence. A significant external debt and dependence on remittances from labour migrants pose serious risks to the country's economic security. The implementation of major infrastructure projects with China's participation, despite potential benefits, has led to an increase in the debt burden. At the same time, integration into the Eurasian Economic Union has opened access to the Russian market and created favourable conditions for trade. The development of economic cooperation with Turkey and other regional partners has contributed to the diversification of foreign economic relations and the reduction of dependence on individual countries. An important role in this process was played by the modernisation of the energy sector and the development of new transport corridors, which strengthened the country's position in the regional economic system. Kyrgyz Republic's ability to effectively balance the interests of major powers has played a key role in the successful implementation of a multi-vector foreign policy. Active participation in international organisations, such as the SCO, the EAEU, and the Organisation of Turkic States, strengthens the country's influence in addressing regional security issues. Achievements in water and energy diplomacy, including agreements on the joint use of water resources, highlight Kyrgyz Republic's role as a responsible partner. The development of digital technologies and environmental initiatives opens up new opportunities for international cooperation and the protection of

national interests. An important aspect has been the strengthening of cultural and humanitarian ties, which contributes to enhancing the country's international stature.

This research has a number of limitations, related to the high dynamics of political processes in the region and the difficulty of accessing current diplomatic documents. It is also worth noting that the analysis of certain aspects of international relations was complicated by the confidential nature of interstate negotiations and the limited statistical data on certain areas of cooperation.

Contemporary processes in international relations in Central Asia create new opportunities for in-depth research. It is important to pay special attention to how digital transformation is changing the tools of foreign policy and influencing the mechanisms of regional security provision. The growing climate challenges require detailed study of the potential of environmental diplomacy and the search for new formats of multilateral cooperation to address transboundary issues. Researching these aspects could significantly expand the understanding of current trends in the region's international relations and contribute to the development of more effective strategies for maintaining regional stability.

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### **Conflict of interest and originality declaration**

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