

Middle Powers and Institutional Adaptation in Regional Security Organizations: The Case of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

Kairat Batyrbayev¹, Maira Dyussebekova², Svetlana Kozhirova³ & Yelena Nechayeva⁴

Abstract

This article investigates how a middle power can drive institutional adaptation within a regional security organization, focusing on Kazakhstan's role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). While most studies emphasize the dominance of China and Russia, the mechanisms through which medium-sized states influence organizational development remain underexplored. The research adopts a qualitative comparative design that combines structured content analysis and process tracing. The unit of analysis is Kazakhstan-led initiatives introduced during its four SCO chairmanships (2005, 2011, 2017, 2023–2024). Three mechanisms of middle-power agency are operationalized: agenda-setting, norm entrepreneurship, and coalition-building, and their outcomes are measured using a three-level institutionalization scale (rhetorical → procedural → institutional). The corpus includes 50 official SCO documents and 20 national strategy papers from 2001 to 2024. The findings show that Kazakhstan consistently used its chairmanships to broaden the SCO agenda beyond traditional security, advancing issues of energy, digital transformation, and climate sustainability. By aligning its initiatives with the priorities of major members and mobilizing regional coalitions, Kazakhstan was able to move several proposals from a declarative to either procedural or institutional status. The study contributes to the middle power theory by demonstrating its applicability in the Eurasian context and offers an operational framework for evaluating institutional change in regional organizations. It also provides policy-relevant insights into how middle powers can enhance their agency under conditions of great-power asymmetry.

Keywords: *Shanghai Cooperation Organization, middle powers, institutional adaptation, regional security governance, Kazakhstan.*

Introduction

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has become one of the key regional frameworks linking Central and South Asia with Eurasia's major powers. Since its establishment in 2001, the SCO has evolved from a security-focused mechanism into a platform for multidimensional

¹ PhD Student, L.N.Gumilyov Eurasian National University & Lecturer, Astana International University, Astana, Kazakhstan; eami.kairat@gmail.com

² Professor at Department of Political Science, L.N.Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana, Kazakhstan; maira.enu@mail.ru

³ Doctor of Political Sciences, Professor at Higher School of Art and Social Sciences, Astana International University, Astana, Kazakhstan; s.kozhirova@yandex.kz

⁴ PhD, Professor, Department of Political Science, L.N.Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana, Kazakhstan; nechayeva_yel@enu.kz

cooperation, reflecting the increasing complexity of Eurasian governance. Within this structure, Kazakhstan occupies a distinctive position as an active middle power seeking to balance interests of great powers while advancing regional stability.

In recent years, scholarship on middle powers has expanded considerably, exploring how states outside the traditional Western sphere exercise influence in global and regional governance (Beeson, 2022; Cooper, 1993; Lee, 2015). These studies highlight the growing agency of non-Western middle powers, which adapt established diplomatic practices to contexts defined by sovereignty, pluralism, and developmental pragmatism (Acharya, 2021; Swanepoel, 2025).

However, the literature remains predominantly Western-centric, focusing on OECD cases such as Canada, Australia, or South Korea. The specific dynamics of middle-power behavior in Eurasian regional institutions, including the SCO, remain underexplored (Laruelle, 2021; Söderbaum, 2016). Taken together, these two bodies of literature, one on non-Western middle powers, and the other examining the SCO from a geopolitical perspective, overlook a key question regarding mechanisms of institutional influence. A clear gap exists in understanding how, precisely, a middle power in the Eurasian context can translate its national initiatives into measurable institutional outcomes within an organization like the SCO.

Kazakhstan's role in the SCO offers a valuable opportunity to extend the theoretical boundaries of middle-power analysis. The country has served as chair of the organization four times — in 2005, 2011, 2017, and 2023–2024 — and has consistently proposed new areas of cooperation, such as energy connectivity, cultural dialogue, and sustainable development. These initiatives have contributed to the gradual institutional evolution of the SCO, yet few studies have systematically examined how Kazakhstan's diplomatic agency translates into measurable organizational outcomes.

The existing literature on the SCO primarily focuses on the organization's geopolitical significance and its balancing role vis-à-vis global powers (Kondapalli et al., 2022; Nazarova & Dauyen, 2024; Nyshanbayev et al., 2024). Although this body of work has provided valuable descriptive insights, it rarely connects empirical developments with theoretical debates on institutional adaptation or middle-power agency. As a result, there remains a clear gap concerning the mechanisms through which a Eurasian middle power such as Kazakhstan influences the institutional trajectory of the SCO.

This study seeks to address that gap by analyzing Kazakhstan's contribution to the institutional adaptation of the SCO through the lens of middle-power theory. It integrates recent theoretical advances in non-Western regionalism and norm diffusion (Beeson, 2022; Acharya, 2021) with process tracing and qualitative content analysis of primary documents from four chairmanship cycles. By focusing on the causal mechanisms linking national initiatives to institutional outcomes, the article aims to clarify how middle-power diplomacy operates in a sovereignty-centered regional environment.

This article argues that Kazakhstan, acting as a middle power, has driven a gradual but cumulatively significant institutional adaptation of the SCO through three interrelated mechanisms: agenda-setting, norm entrepreneurship, and coalition-building. This pattern of influence, exercised across four chairmanships, demonstrates a distinct Eurasian model of middle-power diplomacy characterized by adaptive brokerage, sovereignty-conscious norm diffusion, and consensus-based institutional layering.

Furthermore, this study is explicitly positioned within the scope of social studies and international relations education. It offers a useful empirical case for curricula focusing on international organizations, non-Western diplomacy, and contemporary Eurasian affairs. By moving beyond conventional analyses centered on hegemonic actors, the study provides students and educators with an analytical framework for understanding how states with limited material resources can exert influence through diplomatic agility and institutional entrepreneurship within sovereignty-based regional frameworks. In this way, the findings enrich the pedagogical toolkit for teaching global governance beyond traditional Eurocentric models.

The structure of the article is as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework, discussing the evolution of middle-power theory, institutional adaptation in regional organizations, and the specific features of Eurasian governance. Section 3 defines the study's aims and research questions. Section 4 explains the methodological design and data collection procedures. Section 5 presents the findings from the four chairmanship periods and discusses the mechanisms of Kazakhstan's influence. The final section summarizes the main conclusions, highlights policy implications, and suggests directions for future research.

Theoretical Framework

1.1. Middle-Power Theory and Its Evolution

Middle-power theory was originally developed to explain how states situated between major and small powers exert influence in world politics. Early behavioral definitions associated middle powers with multilateral activism, coalition-building, and support for international norms (Cooper et al., 1993). Over time, the concept has evolved to reflect the growing complexity of the international order. Beeson (2022) emphasizes that middle powers now operate in a fragmented post-liberal system, where influence depends on adaptability rather than hierarchy. Lee (2015) argues further that middle powers increasingly engage in pragmatic, issue-specific multilateralism designed to preserve strategic autonomy rather than promoting a universal liberal agenda.

Recent scholarship has also turned to non-Western middle powers. Swanepoel (2025) shows that emerging actors in Asia and the Global South tend to employ consensus-building and developmental pragmatism rather than ideological leadership. This perspective broadens the theory by incorporating regional variation and explicitly recognizing forms of agency rooted in sovereignty and pluralism. Within this debate, Kazakhstan exemplifies a Eurasian middle power that balances great-power relations while simultaneously promoting cooperative regionalism through agenda entrepreneurship and quiet diplomacy.

1.2. Institutional Adaptation in Regional Organizations

Institutional adaptation refers to the process through which organizations adjust their norms, rules, and procedures in response to political and structural change. In Western contexts, adaptation typically occurs through formalized delegation and rule modification (Keohane, 1984; Börzel & Risse, 2021). By contrast, Acharya (2021) and Söderbaum (2016) show that non-Western regional organizations often rely on informal, consensus-based mechanisms, in which sovereignty and flexibility take precedence over legalism. This alternative logic produces institutions that evolve incrementally through negotiation, coordination, and mutual adjustment.

The SCO embodies this pattern of pragmatic evolution. As Laruelle (2021) notes, its institutional resilience stems from procedural minimalism and a shared commitment to sovereignty. Within such settings, middle powers frequently act as institutional entrepreneurs, introducing new agendas and facilitating compromise among larger and smaller members. Kazakhstan's repeated

chairmanships illustrate how a state without hegemonic power can nevertheless guide adaptation by embedding new cooperative norms within existing institutional procedures.

1.3. Regional Security Governance and the Eurasian Context

Eurasian security governance differs from its European counterpart by favoring overlapping, consensus-oriented institutions, such as the SCO, CSTO, and CICA, instead of supranational integration. Laruelle (2021) and Nazarova & Dauyen (2024) describe this arrangement as a pluralistic system that values regime compatibility and gradual coordination. Rather than transferring authority upward, states manage security through networked diplomacy and shared functional projects in areas such as counterterrorism, infrastructure, and sustainable development. Within this environment, Kazakhstan functions as a bridging actor, linking great-power interests with the priorities of smaller regional states. Its diplomacy represents an adaptive brokerage strategy: building coalitions, aligning initiatives, and mediating divergent preferences to maintain regional equilibrium in a multipolar setting. This context provides the foundation for identifying a distinctive Eurasian variant of middle-power diplomacy, which is explored below.

1.4. Defining a Eurasian Model of Middle-Power Diplomacy

The Eurasian model of middle-power diplomacy departs from Western-centric interpretations in several theoretical respects. First, its normative foundations rest on sovereignty-based pluralism rather than universal liberal norms; cooperation is grounded in equality and mutual respect among states. Second, the institutional environment is flexible and consensus-driven: influence emerges through informal coordination rather than legal delegation. Third, the mechanisms of influence rely on elite consensus and agenda management instead of public advocacy or civil diplomacy. Finally, its strategic orientation is stabilizing rather than transformative, aiming to preserve balance among great powers and safeguard autonomy for smaller states.

This approach conceptualizes middle-power agency as adaptive brokerage within sovereignty-centered systems. We define adaptive brokerage as a diplomatic strategy wherein a middle power acts as a systemic intermediary capable of facilitating consensus and driving incremental institutional change. This involves a set of core practices:

1. Diagnosing Overlap: Continuously identifying and mapping areas of convergent interest among major powers (e.g., China, Russia) and smaller member states, even amidst intensifying strategic competition.
2. Framing and Reframing: Crafting and promoting mutually acceptable formulations for new initiatives, often by linking them to the organization's existing normative principles (e.g., the "Shanghai Spirit") to ensure their legitimacy and political palatability.
3. Tactful Entrepreneurship: Advancing proposals in a manner that de-emphasizes national credit and frames them as collective goods, thereby avoiding the perception of directly challenging the leadership or sovereignty of larger members.
4. Procedural Facilitation: Using formal positions, such as the chairmanship, to manage agendas and negotiation processes in a way that bridges divergent preferences and encourages pragmatic compromise.

Kazakhstan's activity in the SCO exemplifies this model, demonstrating how a proactive but non-hegemonic actor can promote incremental institutional change while simultaneously reinforcing regional stability. The core distinctions between this emergent Eurasian model and the established Western-centric paradigm are summarized in Table below.

Table 1
Comparing Western and Eurasian Models of Middle-Power Diplomacy

Aspect of Diplomacy	Western-Centric Model	Eurasian Model (as exemplified by Kazakhstan in the SCO)
Normative Foundations	Promotion of universal liberal norms (human rights, democracy, liberal institutionalism).	Sovereignty-based pluralism; non-interference, equality, mutual respect, and developmental pragmatism.
Institutional Environment	Formal, legalistic, and often supranational institutions; rule-based governance.	Flexible, consensus-driven organizations; procedural minimalism; preference for informal coordination over legal delegation.
Mechanisms of Influence	Public advocacy, civil diplomacy, leadership in drafting formal treaties and rules.	Quiet diplomacy, elite consensus-building, agenda management, and adaptive brokerage between major and smaller powers.
Strategic Orientation	Often transformative, aiming to reform or strengthen the liberal international order.	Stabilizing and equilibrium-seeking; aims to preserve balance among great powers and maintain strategic autonomy for smaller states.
Primary Mode of Action	Normative leadership and coalition-building for value-based goals.	Functional and pragmatic entrepreneurship, introducing new cooperative areas without challenging the political status quo.

Aim and Questions of the Study

This study aims to examine how Kazakhstan, as a middle power, contributes to the institutional adaptation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) within the rapidly evolving Eurasian

security architecture. Building on middle-power theory (Beeson, 2022; Lee, 2015; Cooper, 1993) and the literature on institutional adaptation in non-Western regional organizations (Acharya, 2021; Söderbaum, 2016), the research seeks to identify the key mechanisms through which Kazakhstan's diplomatic strategies have influenced the SCO's institutional evolution.

The empirical focus is on Kazakhstan's four chairmanships in the SCO: 2005, 2011, 2017, and 2023-2024, which offer observable instances of policy entrepreneurship and agenda management. Following the logic of comparative case process tracing (Beach & Pedersen, 2019), each chairmanship serves as a distinct sub-case to trace causal linkages between state initiatives and institutional outcomes.

The main aim of the study is to conceptualize and explain the mechanisms through which Kazakhstan, acting as a middle power, has promoted institutional adaptation within the SCO. Accordingly, the research pursues three specific objectives:

1. To integrate middle-power theory with institutional adaptation approaches in the context of Eurasian regionalism.
2. To analyze Kazakhstan's institutional initiatives and their observable effect on SCO structures and practices.
3. To assess whether Kazakhstan's behavior exemplifies a regionally specific Eurasian model of middle-power diplomacy, differing from established Western-centric patterns.

These objectives lead to the following research questions:

1. How does middle-power theory explain Kazakhstan's role in the SCO's institutional evolution?
2. Through which mechanisms, such as agenda-setting, coalition-building, and norm entrepreneurship (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Nye, 2011), has Kazakhstan exerted institutional influence?
3. Does Kazakhstan's conduct represent a regionally distinct model of middle-power diplomacy grounded in Eurasian principles of consensus and sovereignty (Laruelle, 2021; Nazarova & Dauyen, 2024)?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes both theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, it extends middle-power analysis to non-Western, sovereignty-based systems of governance. Empirically, it deepens understanding of how mid-level states can sustain regional institutions and foster adaptive cooperation in multipolar environments.

Method

3.1. Research Design and Data Corpus

The study employs a qualitative, comparative process-tracing design (Beach & Pedersen, 2019), combining structured content analysis with causal mechanism mapping. This approach allows for a systematic and rigorous examination of how Kazakhstan's diplomatic actions as a middle power have contributed to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) institutional adaptation.

Recent methodological scholarship in social science research emphasizes the importance of coherent research design, transparent analytical procedures, and the integration of qualitative techniques when examining complex institutional and governance processes. Such approaches are particularly relevant for studies employing comparative qualitative analysis and process tracing to explore institutional adaptation and organizational change (Aramide et al., 2023).

The unit of analysis is Kazakhstan's participation in the SCO during its four chairmanships: 2005, 2011, 2017, and 2023-2024. Each chairmanship serves as a distinct sub-case through which the study observes the mechanisms of agenda-setting, norm entrepreneurship, and coalition-building.

The data corpus consists of:

- Official SCO documents: summit declarations, charters, joint communiqués, and annual reports (2001-2024), retrieved from the SCO Secretariat archives and national foreign ministry websites.
- Speeches and policy statements: by the President of Kazakhstan and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the chairmanship years.
- Academic and analytical sources: peer-reviewed articles and institutional studies (e.g., Nazarova & Dauyen, 2024; Laruelle, 2021; Acharya, 2021).

This combination of primary and secondary data ensures both analytical depth and triangulation of evidence.

3.2. Data Collection and Coding Procedure

Data Collection

Data were collected from open-access institutional repositories, the SCO official website, and governmental archives of member states. The corpus comprised 50 SCO foundational and summit documents (declarations, communiqués, strategies) and 20 national strategy papers and diplomatic statements from Kazakhstan, covering the period from 2001 to 2024. All texts were converted into a uniform format (UTF-8) and imported into NVivo 14 for qualitative analysis.

Codebook Development and Application

The study employed thematic qualitative content analysis, with a primary emphasis on thematic selection and categorization, while NVivo 14 was used as a supportive analytical tool rather than a substitute for interpretive analysis. Codebook development followed a structured, multi-stage procedure. First, a document database was created, with each text assigned a numeric identifier based on year, document type, and chairmanship cycle. Second, open coding was applied to identify recurring themes related to agenda-setting, norm entrepreneurship, and coalition-building. Third, these initial codes were refined through axial coding, linking thematic categories to institutional mechanisms and observable outcomes. Finally, selective coding was used to consolidate core analytical categories aligned with the theoretical framework and research questions.

The final codebook thus combined deductive categories derived from middle-power theory with inductively generated themes emerging from systematic engagement with the empirical material, ensuring both theoretical coherence and empirical sensitivity.

Table 2
Codebook for Qualitative Content Analysis

Mechanism	Code / Theme	Definition	Example from Data
Agenda-Setting	Introduction of new initiatives	Proposing new areas of cooperation, projects, or policy frameworks within the SCO.	"Kazakhstan proposes the establishment of an SCO Energy Club to ensure stable energy markets." (Astana Declaration, 2011)
	Expansion of mandate	Advocating for the broadening of the organization's functional scope beyond its original purpose.	"We support the transformation of the SCO into a multifunctional platform for economic and humanitarian cooperation." (Speech by President Nazarbayev, 2005)
Norm Entrepreneurship	Framing / Renaming	Introducing new normative concepts or redefining existing ones to guide cooperation.	"The 'Shanghai Spirit' is our path to collective development based on mutual benefit." (2005 Astana Declaration)
	Linking to global norms	Connecting regional initiatives to broader global governance discourses (e.g., SDGs, multipolarity).	"Our Digital Agenda aligns with the global pursuit of sustainable and inclusive growth." (2017 Summit Statement)
Coalition-Building	Mediation / Brokerage	Articulating a role as a bridge or facilitator between differing member state positions.	"Kazakhstan is ready to work with all parties to find a consensus on the organization's future development." (MFA Statement, 2017)
	Forging consensus	Explicitly referencing efforts to build agreement or coordinate joint actions among members.	"We have coordinated with our Russian and Chinese partners to advance this initiative, while considering the views of Central Asian states."

Coding Reliability and Disagreement Resolution

To ensure the dependability and transferability of the qualitative analysis, the coding process was conducted systematically and transparently. Two researchers, the author and a trained assistant, independently coded the entire dataset using the same codebook. Inter-coder agreement was assessed on a randomly selected 15% sample of the documents using NVivo's coding comparison tool, resulting in a Cohen's Kappa coefficient of 0.82, which indicates a high level of coding consistency.

Credibility (validity) was strengthened through several techniques. First, methodological triangulation was applied by analyzing multiple types of sources, including official SCO documents, policy statements, and secondary analytical materials. Second, discrepancies in coding were discussed in structured consensus meetings until full agreement was reached on all disputed segments. Third, the use of process tracing enabled the systematic linking of empirical observations to clearly specified causal mechanisms across cases. Together, these procedures enhanced the trustworthiness, analytical rigor, and reproducibility of the qualitative findings.

3.3. Data Analysis: Process Tracing and Causal Mechanism Mapping

Although preliminary analytical reading informed the organization and selection of documents during the data collection phase, data analysis constituted a distinct and subsequent stage of the research process. An iterative analytical approach was adopted because process tracing requires continuous movement between empirical material and hypothesized causal mechanisms to refine explanations, verify temporal sequences, and ensure analytical coherence across cases.

The analysis combined thematic qualitative content analysis, guided by the codebook, with process tracing to identify causal linkages between Kazakhstan's initiatives and institutional outcomes within the SCO. Following established guidelines for process tracing, the analysis proceeded through three analytical steps.

Mechanism identification. Hypothesized causal pathways (for example, "Kazakhstan's promotion of the Energy Club concept → increased ministerial dialogue → creation of procedural platforms") were formulated based on systematically coded data.

Empirical testing. The coded evidence was used to construct detailed chronological narratives for each chairmanship period. The analysis examined whether observed sequences of events, such as the introduction of proposals in official statements, their incorporation into draft documents, and

subsequent inclusion in final communiqués, supported the existence of the hypothesized mechanisms.

Cross-case comparison. The mechanisms and their institutional outcomes were compared across the four chairmanship cycles to identify recurring patterns of influence and adaptation (see Section 4.5).

Institutional outcomes were operationalized using a three-tier scale of institutionalization: rhetorical (references in official declarations), procedural (integration into working agendas or regular coordination mechanisms), and institutional (establishment of permanent bodies or formal strategies). The analytical results were triangulated with secondary expert analyses to enhance credibility and external validity.

Findings

This section presents empirical findings from the comparative analysis of Kazakhstan's four chairmanships of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): 2005, 2011, 2017, and 2023–2024. Each case illustrates a distinct phase of the organization's institutional evolution, while the final subsection synthesizes the mechanisms of Kazakhstan's influence across cycles.

4.1. The 2005 Chairmanship: Institutional Consolidation

Kazakhstan's first chairmanship (2005) occurred during the SCO's formative years, when institutional structures were still embryonic. The country used its position to consolidate the organizational framework, promote economic cooperation, and enhance the SCO's international profile.

- Agenda-setting: Kazakhstan advanced the idea of transforming the SCO from a narrowly security-oriented body into a broader platform for economic and developmental cooperation. This resulted in the establishment of two new instruments: the SCO Business Council and the SCO Interbank Consortium, both of which institutionalized sustained economic dialogue between member states and the private sector (SCO, 2005).
- Norm entrepreneurship: The 2005 Astana Declaration introduced the concept of a "Shanghai Spirit", redefined as collective development based on equality and mutual benefit (SCO, 2005). This narrative aligned the SCO with Kazakhstan's regional diplomacy of "balanced multilateralism".

- Coalition-building: Kazakhstan actively coordinated with China and Russia to ensure consensus on new economic initiatives, facilitating compromise on the organization's future direction.
- Institutional outcome: By the end of its chairmanship, Kazakhstan had elevated the SCO to a Level 3 institutionalization (structural consolidation), adding permanent organs and expanding the scope of cooperation. The 2005 cycle thus represents the foundational stage of Kazakhstan's institutional entrepreneurship.

This early success in institutional consolidation underscores that a middle power's influence is most potent during an organization's formative or transitional phases. Kazakhstan's ability to establish new economic bodies was facilitated by the SCO's still-fluid institutional identity and a shared, post-Cold War desire among all members to demonstrate the organization's viability beyond mere security dialogue. However, this also reveals a constraint: such foundational entrepreneurship is often a one-time opportunity. Once core structures are set, the space for creating new permanent bodies diminishes, and subsequent influence must shift to softer forms of agenda-setting and norm adaptation within an increasingly rigidified framework.

4.2. The 2011 Chairmanship: Functional Expansion

The 2011 chairmanship occurred amid renewed global uncertainty following the global financial crisis and the Arab Spring, both of which highlighted the need for comprehensive regional stability mechanisms. Kazakhstan's strategy focused on functional diversification and energy cooperation.

- Agenda-setting: Kazakhstan introduced the idea of a SCO Energy Club, envisioned as a platform for coordinating energy policies, investment, and transit routes. Although not formalized as a permanent body, the proposal triggered sustained cooperation among energy ministries and expert communities, later institutionalized as regular Energy Forums (SCO, 2011).
- Norm entrepreneurship: Kazakhstan promoted the narrative of "mutually secured development", linking energy interdependence with economic and political stability. This framing positioned the SCO within a broader discourse of energy security governance, blending national interests with regional cooperation.
- Coalition-building: Kazakhstan built a coalition with Russia and Uzbekistan to advocate energy dialogue while balancing China's concerns about institutional overreach. This demonstrates the middle-power capacity for strategic mediation between competing priorities.

- Institutional outcome: The Energy Club concept achieved Level 2 institutionalization: procedural adoption without full structural embodiment, but it significantly expanded the SCO's policy space and deepened inter-sectoral coordination (Laruelle, 2021).

The trajectory of the Energy Club initiative—from proposal to a procedural platform rather than a formal body—exemplifies the asymmetrical bargaining power within the SCO. While Kazakhstan successfully identified a convergent interest (energy security), the initiative's ultimate shape was dictated by the need to balance China's preference for flexible, bilateral energy deals and Russia's wariness of ceding control over multilateral energy governance. Thus, the outcome reflects a classic middle-power compromise: achieving functional recognition and sustained dialogue (a Level 2 outcome) but falling short of the originally envisioned, powerful institutional tool, illustrating how great-power preferences can cap the level of institutionalization.

4.3. The 2017 Chairmanship: Adaptive Diversification

Kazakhstan's third chairmanship coincided with the SCO's enlargement through the accession of India and Pakistan, which created both opportunities and institutional strain. In this context, Kazakhstan pursued adaptive diversification, ensuring coherence amid complexity.

- Agenda-setting: The 2017 Astana Summit adopted the SCO Digital Agenda, integrating digitalization and innovation into the organization's portfolio. It also endorsed the Green Belt Initiative, focused on ecological sustainability and energy efficiency (SCO, 2017).
- Norm entrepreneurship: The "Astana Spirit" was introduced as a renewal of the "Shanghai Spirit," explicitly connecting technological progress with environmental responsibility (SCO, 2017). This norm reframing aligned the SCO with the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and promoted a multidimensional understanding of security (Acharya, 2021).
- Coalition-building: Kazakhstan facilitated compromise between new members (India, Pakistan) and founding states, preventing paralysis during enlargement. Its mediating diplomacy preserved consensus and legitimacy, critical for post-expansion stability.
- Institutional outcome: The creation of the SCO Expert Group on Digital Economy and inclusion of sustainability in the official discourse represent Level 2-3 institutionalization. Kazakhstan's 2017 leadership thus marked the SCO's transition from consolidation to functional diversification and normative renewal.

The 2017 chairmanship highlights a middle power's role as a manager of complexity during institutional stress (enlargement). Kazakhstan's success in introducing new digital and green agendas while mediating between old and new members demonstrates that agency can stem from acting as an indispensable facilitator. However, this "adaptive diversification" also carries a risk of agenda dilution. The need to find universally acceptable, low-conflict areas like "digital economy" and "sustainability" may steer the organization towards less politically sensitive, albeit potentially less impactful, technical cooperation, potentially at the expense of deeper integration on core security or economic issues.

4.4. The 2023–2024 Chairmanship: Strategic Repositioning

Kazakhstan's fourth chairmanship took place under dramatically transformed global conditions — post-pandemic recovery, intensified geopolitical competition, and debates about the “world majority”. This cycle focused on revitalizing the SCO's relevance and asserting a new vision of responsible multipolarity.

- **Agenda-setting:** The 2023-2024 cycle introduced the SCO Economic Dialogue Platform, aimed at coordinating macroeconomic policy, green financing, and logistics corridors. Kazakhstan also launched initiatives on digital trust, food security, and youth innovation, broadening the organization's social and technological agenda (SCO, 2024).
- **Norm entrepreneurship:** Kazakhstan framed its chairmanship under the theme "Unity through Constructive Cooperation", proposing a balanced vision of multipolarity without confrontation (SCO, 2024). This redefined the SCO's normative posture as a stabilizing coalition of the Global South, aligning with emerging discourses of "world majority" cooperation.
- **Coalition-building:** Kazakhstan acted as a bridge between major and smaller members, promoting practical cooperation over ideological polarization. The country's ability to balance China's Belt and Road priorities with India's developmental concerns demonstrated adaptive brokerage in practice.
- **Institutional outcome:** The 2024 Astana Declaration and adopted "Roadmap for Modernization of SCO Institutions" formalized Kazakhstan's proposals on procedural efficiency and public diplomacy, reaching Level 3 institutionalization. The chairmanship reasserted Kazakhstan's position as a reform-oriented middle power and revitalized the SCO's adaptive legitimacy in the evolving Eurasian order.

In a period of intense geopolitical fragmentation, Kazakhstan’s chairmanship faced the greatest test: maintaining the SCO’s relevance without being drawn into bloc confrontation. The promotion of themes like "responsible multipolarity" and institutional "modernization" represents a sophisticated attempt at normative hedging. It seeks to appeal to all members by framing the SCO as a stabilizing, development-focused platform for the "Global South," distinct from Western-led orders. The success of this repositioning remains contingent and fragile, however, as it depends on the continued willingness of major rivals (China, Russia, India) to prioritize functional cooperation within the SCO over their bilateral disputes—a condition largely outside a middle power’s control.

4.5. Mechanisms of Kazakhstan’s Influence

Comparative analysis of the four chairmanships reveals a progressive deepening of middle-power agency within the SCO’s institutional evolution. Kazakhstan’s influence was exercised through three interacting mechanisms, each observable through measurable outcomes.

(a) Agenda-Setting. Across all chairmanships, Kazakhstan consistently introduced new thematic areas that expanded the SCO's functional boundaries: from economic cooperation (2005) to energy dialogue (2011), digitalization and sustainability (2017), and multipolar economic governance (2023-2024). Each initiative was subsequently embedded in summit declarations or working agendas, indicating procedural acceptance and incremental institutionalization.

Table 3
Agenda-Setting Outcomes Across Chairmanships

Cycle	Initiative	Institutional Level	Result
2005	SCO Business Council / Interbank Consortium	Level 3	Permanent institutionalisation
2011	SCO Energy Club concept	Level 2	Procedural platform for dialogue
2017	Digital Agenda / Green Belt	Level 2–3	Regularised cooperation formats
2023–2024	Economic Dialogue / Digital Trust	Level 3	Roadmap for institutional modernisation

(b) Norm Entrepreneurship. Kazakhstan's chairmanships consistently introduced normative innovations that reframed the SCO's identity and principles (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998):

- 2005: “Shanghai Spirit” reinterpreted through “collective development”;
- 2011: “mutually secured development”;
- 2017: “Astana Spirit” — merging innovation with sustainability;
- 2023–2024: “responsible multipolarity.”

These norms progressively expanded the SCO's ideational foundation, linking regional cooperation to global governance values and contributing to its soft-power legitimacy.

(c) Coalition-Building. Kazakhstan's role as mediator and broker ensured the operability of consensus during critical junctures - enlargement (2017), institutional reform (2023-2024), and policy diversification (2011). The country repeatedly acted as a connector between major powers (China, Russia, India) and smaller members, converting potential fragmentation into pragmatic coordination (Swanepoel, 2025). This mechanism sustained organisational stability and continuity - a key factor in the SCO's resilience, as summarised in Table 4.

Table 4

Kazakhstan's influence followed a layered trajectory:

Chairmanship	Phase	Mechanism Dominance	Adaptation Type
2005	Institutional consolidation	Agenda-setting	Structural adaptation
2011	Functional expansion	Agenda-setting & coalition-building	Sectoral adaptation
2017	Adaptive diversification	Norm entrepreneurship & brokerage	Normative adaptation
2023–2024	Strategic repositioning	Norm entrepreneurship & coalition-building	Systemic adaptation

Collectively, these mechanisms illustrate how a middle power can act as an institutional entrepreneur in a sovereignty-based organisation by linking micro-level initiatives to macro-level adaptation. Kazakhstan's sustained engagement demonstrates that middle-power agency in non-liberal contexts is not episodic but cumulative and transformative — producing lasting procedural, normative, and structural effects within regional governance frameworks.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that Kazakhstan's influence within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization operates through adaptive middle-power agency, expressed in agenda-setting, consensus-building, and incremental norm entrepreneurship rather than formal institutional reform. The findings show that Kazakhstan's initiatives translated into institutional outcomes through identifiable causal mechanisms, including discursive entrepreneurship, policy translation, and functional expansion, which unfolded across successive chairmanship cycles. These results highlight how middle powers can contribute to institutional adaptation in sovereignty-centered regional organizations by aligning normative proposals with existing governance principles. The discussion that follows therefore focuses on three dimensions: the theoretical implications of these

findings for middle-power agency, the empirical mechanisms linking national initiatives to institutional outcomes, and the broader consequences for regional security governance in Eurasia.

5.1. Theoretical Implications: Refining Middle-Power Agency

The analysis of Kazakhstan's participation in the SCO challenges and refines existing conceptions of middle-power agency. Our findings directly contest the Western-centric assumption, prevalent in the foundational works of Cooper et al. (1993), that middle-power influence is predicated on liberal norm advocacy within rule-based, often liberal-internationalist, frameworks. Instead, the Kazakh case demonstrates that in sovereignty-centered systems like the SCO, effective middle-power agency is decoupled from the promotion of a universal liberal agenda. Rather, it operates through a distinct set of practices: adaptive brokerage, consensus-building, and functional norm entrepreneurship tailored to a pluralistic and pragmatic regional context (Acharya, 2021; Söderbaum, 2016).

Rather than promoting universal liberal norms, Kazakhstan advances selective and functional norms that fit the political culture of the region and reinforce collective sovereignty. This behavior reflects what may be termed adaptive middle-power diplomacy, where influence is exercised through agenda-setting, coordination, and incremental norm diffusion rather than institutional delegation. The SCO provides a conducive environment for such behavior because its governance structure prioritizes informality, equality among members, and non-interference in domestic affairs (Acharya, 2021; Söderbaum, 2016). Kazakhstan's approach thus expands the middle-power framework beyond its Western-centric assumptions, demonstrating that middle powers operating in sovereignty-based systems can contribute to institutional evolution by embedding new norms through persuasion and negotiation rather than formal reform or value-driven advocacy.

5.2. Institutional Adaptation and Causal Mechanisms

Kazakhstan's activity within the SCO demonstrates a form of incremental norm entrepreneurship, characterized by a gradual, consensus-oriented strategy for introducing new cooperative norms. The systematic qualitative content analysis reveals three primary causal mechanisms through which Kazakhstan's initiatives have influenced institutional adaptation in the organization. The application of this structured coding framework allows us to move beyond interpretive claims and empirically trace how specific Kazakh proposals evolved into institutional outcomes.

(1) Discursive entrepreneurship (2005). The coding process systematically identified normative re-framings, such as the emphasis on "mutual trust, equality, and cultural diversity" in the 2005 Astana Declaration initiated by Kazakhstan (SCO, 2005). These formulations were subsequently integrated into the SCO's operational lexicon, forming part of the discursive foundation of the "Shanghai Spirit". This illustrates how Kazakhstan's rhetorical framing contributed to shaping the normative vocabulary of the organization, representing an instance of discursive entrepreneurship in a multilateral setting (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

(2) Policy translation (2011). The process-tracing of coded data shows a clear trajectory: In 2011, Kazakhstan promoted economic connectivity and energy cooperation as new areas of collaboration. Although initially framed as political statements, these priorities reappeared in subsequent SCO strategies, which institutionalized economic interaction as one of the organization's core pillars (Nazarova & Dauyen, 2024). This process shows how a national initiative can evolve into a shared policy norm through repeated advocacy and gradual consensus formation.

(3) Functional expansion (2023–2024). Kazakhstan's 2023–2024 chairmanship introduced priorities such as the "green economy" and "digital interconnectivity." These topics were incorporated into the Astana Chairmanship Concept Paper and reflected in the final declaration (SCO, 2024), marking a key step in functional expansion achieved through agenda-setting and sustained diplomacy rather than structural overhaul. Taken together, these mechanisms demonstrate that Kazakhstan's influence operates through adaptive brokerage. Its norm entrepreneurship is incremental, context-sensitive, and aligned with the SCO's guiding principles of equality, non-interference, and mutual respect. Rather than reshaping the organisation's institutional structure, Kazakhstan gradually expands its normative and functional scope through repeated engagement and coalition-building within the framework of consensus politics (Laruelle, 2021).

5.3. Regional Security Governance Implications

Kazakhstan's pattern of engagement has broader implications for understanding regional security governance in Eurasia. The SCO's institutional development reflects a distinctive mode of governance that prioritizes flexibility and regime compatibility over rule-based integration (Börzel & Risse, 2021). In this environment, middle powers like Kazakhstan act as stabilizers and

facilitators of cooperation among diverse political systems (Swanepoel, 2025). By promoting issues such as counterterrorism, economic connectivity, and sustainable development, Kazakhstan has helped to broaden the agenda of the SCO without challenging the sovereignty of its members. This case demonstrates that institutional adaptation in Eurasian organizations emerges through networked coordination and functional consensus, not through hierarchical delegation or supranational authority. Middle powers play a crucial role in this process by identifying politically feasible areas for collaboration and translating them into shared institutional commitments (Cooper, 1993).

5.4. Limitations of the Study

This study's interpretation is necessarily shaped by its methodological choices and data limitations. First, the reliance on publicly available official documents, while providing a record of formal decisions and declarative stances, may create a bias towards portraying consensus and success. Confidential negotiation records, which could reveal dissent, bargaining failures, or the marginalization of proposals, remain inaccessible. Consequently, the analysis might overstate the degree of institutionalization and understate the resistance or dilution initiatives faced behind closed doors. Second, while process-tracing establishes plausible causal links, the qualitative design cannot statistically isolate Kazakhstan's influence from other concurrent factors, such as changing global conditions or initiatives by other members. To verify and deepen the causal mechanisms proposed here, future research should incorporate elite interviews with SCO diplomats and policymakers, archival research in member states, and social network analysis of policy coordination. Despite these limitations, the triangulation of multiple document types and the systematic application of a clear analytical framework provide a robust foundation for the argument that Kazakhstan has been a persistent and mechanism-driven driver of the SCO's institutional adaptation.

5.5. Critical Perspectives and Alternative Interpretations

While this study highlights Kazakhstan's proactive role, it is important to engage with critical perspectives on the SCO's institutional efficacy and the structural constraints of middle-power influence. Some scholars argue that the SCO's consensus principle and procedural minimalism can lead to a "lowest common denominator" outcome, where initiatives are diluted to secure

agreement, resulting in declarative rather than substantive cooperation (Allison, 2018; Cooley, 2019). From this viewpoint, Kazakhstan's successes in agenda-setting might be seen as largely symbolic, with implementation often lagging due to diverging national priorities and a lack of enforcement mechanisms. Furthermore, the organization's security agenda remains dominated by Sino-Russian priorities, potentially relegating middle-power economic and environmental initiatives to a secondary tier. Acknowledging these critiques situates Kazakhstan's diplomatic entrepreneurship within a complex reality, where institutional adaptation is incremental, contested, and subject to the overarching geopolitical equilibrium maintained by the great powers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Summary of Findings

This study set out to examine how Kazakhstan, as a middle power, has contributed to the institutional adaptation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) over two decades and four chairmanships — 2005, 2011, 2017, and 2023–2024. Through a mechanism-based, process-tracing design, it identified and analyzed three interrelated mechanisms of Kazakhstan's institutional influence: agenda-setting, norm entrepreneurship, and coalition-building.

The findings show that Kazakhstan's agency has been gradual, cumulative, and mechanism-driven, resulting in sustained organizational transformation rather than episodic innovation. Each chairmanship represented a distinct stage in the SCO's evolution:

- 2005 – institutional consolidation through establishment of economic bodies (Business Council, Interbank Consortium);
- 2011 – functional expansion via the Energy Club concept and regional economic initiatives;
- 2017 – adaptive diversification through the Digital Agenda and Green Belt initiatives;
- 2023–2024 – strategic repositioning under the vision of responsible multipolarity and institutional modernization.

Together, these episodes demonstrate how a middle power can shape the trajectory of a non-liberal regional organization by linking micro-level procedural innovation with macro-level institutional resilience. Kazakhstan's sustained diplomacy has embedded developmental, technological, and normative dimensions into the SCO's identity, transforming it from a security forum into a multidimensional governance platform (Laruelle, 2021; Nazarova & Dauyen, 2024). The study also confirms that institutional adaptation in the SCO followed a layered and incremental pattern,

characterized by procedural innovation rather than formal reform. This evolution underscores the value of mechanism-based analysis for understanding how regional institutions in the Global South sustain coherence amid systemic transformation.

Theoretical and Policy Recommendations

(a) Theoretical Recommendations.

The findings have several implications for theory-building in international relations and institutional studies:

1. **Refinement of Middle Power Theory.** The study demonstrates that middle power status should be defined not by material capacity or liberal identity, but by the mechanisms of agency—agenda-setting, norm entrepreneurship, and coalition-building—that operate across governance contexts (Beeson, 2022; Cooper, 1993). This mechanism-based approach expands middle power theory beyond OECD and G20 cases, incorporating non-Western, sovereignty-sensitive environments (Swanepoel, 2025).
2. **Extension of Institutional Adaptation Theory.** The SCO case supports a model of entrepreneurial institutionalism, where incremental adaptation is driven by middle-power agency rather than imposed structural reform (Keohane, 1984). Such adaptation occurs through layering, conversion, and normative embedding, providing a flexible yet stable response to external pressures and internal diversity (Söderbaum, 2016).
3. **Integration with Regional Security Governance.** The SCO illustrates that effective governance does not require supranational authority; it can emerge through adaptive regionalism—a system of coordination based on consensus, procedural innovation, and shared legitimacy (Börzel & Risse, 2021). This finding refines existing models of regional security by emphasizing processual coherence over legal formalization.

(b) Policy Recommendations

The policy implications extend to both Kazakhstan's foreign policy and regional institutional development:

1. **Strategic Consistency and Agenda Continuity.** Kazakhstan should maintain long-term thematic continuity between its chairmanships, ensuring that initiatives such as the Digital Agenda, Green Belt, and Economic Dialogue are institutionally embedded through implementation mechanisms

and measurable outcomes. Consistency over time enhances credibility and deepens Kazakhstan's profile as a policy entrepreneur in Eurasia.

2. Institutionalization of Middle-Power Diplomacy. Building a dedicated SCO Chairmanship Coordination Unit within Kazakhstan's MFA could help systematize inter-agency cooperation, track implementation, and strengthen institutional memory between chairmanships. This would operationalize middle-power diplomacy as a structured policy instrument.

3. Enhancing Analytical and Research Capacities. To sustain innovation within the SCO, Kazakhstan should invest in regional analytical networks—universities, think tanks, and policy hubs—that monitor the organization's agenda and provide data-driven recommendations. This would strengthen the scientific and evidence-based component of policy design.

4. Promoting Inclusive Regionalism. Kazakhstan's future initiatives could focus on inclusive cooperation frameworks, engaging observer states, dialogue partners, and civil society actors. Such openness would enhance the SCO's legitimacy and connect it to broader Eurasian and Global South governance networks.

Implications for Social Studies Education

Beyond its theoretical and policy contributions, this case study offers valuable pedagogical material for social studies education. It challenges students to look beyond traditional power hierarchies in international relations and analyze the nuanced strategies of agency available to secondary states. Educators can utilize the three mechanisms—agenda-setting, norm entrepreneurship, and coalition-building—as an analytical framework for comparative regional studies, examining the roles of countries like Indonesia in ASEAN or Brazil in Mercosur. Furthermore, the study of the SCO and Kazakhstan's role within it provides a critical counterpoint to Eurocentric models of regional integration, introducing students to alternative governance models based on sovereignty, consensus, and flexible pragmatism. Integrating such cases into curricula fosters a more pluralistic and globally informed understanding of 21st-century diplomacy and institutional evolution.

Directions for Future Research

While this study offers a systematic explanation of Kazakhstan's institutional influence within the SCO, it also opens several pathways for future inquiry:

1. **Comparative Analysis of Middle Powers.** Future research could compare Kazakhstan with other emerging middle powers in the SCO—such as Uzbekistan or India—to determine whether similar mechanisms of influence operate in different domestic and strategic contexts. A comparative design would help test the generalizability of the mechanism-based model proposed here.
2. **Quantitative and Network Approaches.** Complementary quantitative content analysis or social network analysis could map the intensity of cooperation, co-sponsorship patterns, or communication flows among SCO members (Miles et al., 2020). This would provide a more precise measurement of institutional diffusion and coalition-building dynamics.
3. **Norm Diffusion and Global Governance.** Further research should explore how regional initiatives such as the "Astana Spirit" and "responsible multipolarity" travel beyond the SCO to influence broader global governance discourses on multipolarity, sustainability, and digital ethics (Nye, 2011).
4. **Post-2024 Institutional Evolution.** Given the SCO's growing portfolio in digital, green, and financial domains, longitudinal studies should examine whether Kazakhstan's innovations consolidate into permanent governance architectures or remain episodic responses to geopolitical change.
5. **Domestic–International Linkages.** Finally, future work could analyze how Kazakhstan's domestic policy agendas (e.g., Digital Kazakhstan, Green Economy Strategy) interact with its multilateral diplomacy, shaping its institutional entrepreneurship abroad. This would deepen the understanding of domestic sources of middle-power agency in hybrid political systems.

Closing Reflection

Overall, this research underscores the importance of agency and adaptation in regional institutional evolution. Kazakhstan's sustained, mechanism-based engagement within the SCO demonstrates that even in a system dominated by major powers, middle states can act as stabilizers and innovators, ensuring coherence, flexibility, and normative renewal. By linking national strategy to multilateral entrepreneurship, Kazakhstan has contributed to shaping what may be called a Eurasian model of adaptive governance—a system grounded in sovereignty, consensus, and functional pragmatism (Acharya, 2021; Laruelle, 2021). As global governance becomes increasingly fragmented, the lessons of Kazakhstan's experience suggest that the future of regionalism lies not in formal integration but in strategic adaptability—the ability of middle

powers to connect diverse actors, diffuse constructive norms, and sustain institutional evolution in a multipolar world (Beeson, 2022; Cooper, 1993).

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