Role Theory, Non-Coercive Influence, and the Agency of Target States: The Case of Kazakhstan's Ambassadorial Corps and the Russian Diplomatic Academy

Introduction:

The thirtieth anniversary of the Soviet Union's collapse passed mere months before Russia's large-scale invasion of neighboring former Soviet Republic Ukraine in February 2022, with the conflict ongoing as of this writing. Nor is this the first time Russia has made use of military force against one of its former colonial possessions, with the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 making clear that the Russian regime views forceful coercion as a valid tool for achieving regional foreign policy goals. Yet this sort of coercion is costly to wield, relying on extensive material capabilities while exposing the wielder to international opprobrium, such as the numerous sanctions imposed on Russia since the start of its military campaign in Ukraine.

Therefore, non-coercive mechanisms relying on soft power bases also have an important role to play in maintaining international influence, and Moscow has made use of them in various forms (Chankseliani 2021). One such mechanism is the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Diplomatic Academy (RDA), which trains many foreign service personnel from the post-Soviet region, in addition to providing credentials for Russian diplomats. In the initial post-independence years, former Soviet republics had figurehead foreign ministries but lacked alternative diplomatic training infrastructure (Zickel 1989), making the RDA the most accessible destination as the new countries strove to expand their respective foreign ministries.

In Rubinstein's (1977, xxiii) outstanding operationalization of influence in international relations, "access is held to be the key to influence … the more that *A* has access to *B*'s decision-makers, the greater will be its influence." The RDA being the most convenient diplomatic training option provided a ready source of soft power for Russia when the former metropole had lost much of its direct political clout in the 1990s. However, numerous foreign diplomats across the post-Soviet space continue to receive credentials from the RDA to the present day. This

situation seemingly goes against the interests of these states, as the cadre of Russia-trained foreign policy elites represents a ready soft power basis upon which Russia can draw when seeking to influence these countries.

To the author's knowledge, no work has been done specifically linking foreign policy roles to soft power bases, creating a gap that this paper seeks to help fill. I therefore use a case study of Kazakhstan to investigate how less powerful states respond to sources of great power non-coercive influence. Much of the existing literature focuses on geopolitical concerns, asserting that the various independent former republics remain within or move outside the Russian sphere of influence based on security considerations.

I contribute to work on foreign policy analysis (FPA) by applying role theory to the study of states susceptible to influence attempts by other countries employing soft power because of their position within the international system. Namely, I argue that those former Soviet republics whose leaders select into foreign policy roles requiring engagement with Russia without becoming overly tied to Moscow are more comfortable tolerating sources of Russian soft power, as they are well equipped to take advantage of the benefits of cooperation without being as susceptible to influence attempts.

The structure of the essay proceeds as follows: I first introduce my argument and define soft power in the context of my analytical framework. I next discuss relevant prior work from two main bodies of literature: influence in international relations and role theory in FPA. I then provide greater detail on the research design, with soft power as my analytical framework for a qualitative case study. Next, I provide a discussion of a novel dataset I have compiled on Kazakhstan's entire ambassadorial corps since 1992 before moving to an analysis of the data. The paper concludes by highlighting the benefits of integrating agent-centric role theory into the study of non-coercive influence in world politics.

Argument and analytical framework:

For this project, I draw primarily on Nye's (1990, 2011) work on soft power to inform my analytical framework, but a specific conception of soft power. In contrast to coercion, "soft power is the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes" (Nye 2011, 20–21). Power and influence in international relations come in many forms, and political scientists have spent decades attempting to conceptualize and measure these terms, debating whether they are even the same thing. I concur with Lasswell and Kaplan (2014 [1950]) in viewing influence as a sub-type of power, with influence being "a relational concept," (Rubinstein 1977, xiv).

Nye (2021, 5–6) has acknowledged confusion between soft power as a behavior and soft power as a resource, but ultimately prefers the behavioral version. However, Nye's coining of the term "soft power" does not make its definition his exclusive purview: I concur with Baldwin (2016, 168–70) that soft power is better understood as a resource rather than as a relational concept, as explained in more detail shortly. In this essay, therefore, I consider soft power a latent property of states which only becomes relevant when an attempt to influence another party is initiated (Baldwin 2016, 50).

This view of soft power aligns with principles of neoclassical realist theorizing about military strength and international relations. As Rose (1998, 146–47) describes it, "relative material power establishes the basic parameters of a country's foreign policy," but "there is no immediate or perfect transmission belt linking material capabilities to foreign policy behavior." Neoclassical realism thus recognizes the pressures of an anarchic international system but argues for the importance of those who make foreign policy in responding to those pressures, creating a ready link with the aims of FPA.

In a vacuum, hard power and soft power serve no purpose; state leaders can, however, choose to threaten or entice a target (Singer 1963), at which point bases of power become salient in a relational context. Nye (2021, 10) has insisted that "most of a country's soft power comes from its civil society rather than from its government," but, on its own, soft power, like material power, is merely an attribute of states waiting to be employed. State leaders can then formulate a policy response to foreign soft power bases in the same way they would deliberate if a neighboring country increased their stock of armaments.

For that reason, invoking soft power when discussing two authoritarian states in Kazakhstan and Russia is not problematic. While authoritarian regimes have oftentimes redefined "soft power" in manipulative fashion (Walker 2016), censorship and other such activities are influence *attempts* rather than a form of soft power. Being seen as the leader of Slavic Orthodox Christianity is a soft power base (Bechev 2017, 230); the Russian Patriarch voicing support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Gallagher 2022) is an attempt to influence which relies on that soft power base.

In conjunction with the basic parameters of neoclassical realism, FPA, particularly role theory, serves as an insightful lens for understanding why countries might opt not to combat Russian soft power resources. FPA as an approach also emphasizes the decisions made by foreign policy elites rather than assuming states to be unitary actors, since, ultimately, policy is made by individuals in pursuit of their respective goals, even if those individuals operate within certain limits: FPA is useful here precisely because it "places the individual decision maker at the heart of the foreign policy decision making process" (Breuning 2007, ix).

When analyzing the RDA, having cadres of Russia-trained diplomats within the target country's foreign policy elite increases Russian soft power, since, whether holding policy-making positions or not, diplomats influence how foreign policy is conducted in their home

countries (Gülmez 2019). This cache of foreign policy elites with RDA backgrounds should make it easier for the Russian government to successfully persuade said country to comply with Moscow's wishes without the need for coercive behavior. Kingdon (1984, 17) observes that the development of political agendas and alternatives involves "a process of gradual accumulation of knowledge and perspectives." Thus, continued promotion of RDA-trained personnel can be expected to impact foreign policy decisions since enrollment in the RDA exposes participants to a heavily Russo-centric curriculum featuring modules on topics such as Russian foreign policy and the "international and foreign economic relations of the subjects of the Russian Federation" (Russian MFA 2022).

To be clear, this article does not assert that RDA-trained ambassadors are in any way disloyal or pursuing Russian state interests rather than those of Kazakhstan. Instead of indoctrination, the Russian state, via the RDA, has an opportunity to propagate among key foreign policy elites a particular view of world affairs through what is taught at the RDA. Prior research has shown a linkage between state leaders receiving their education abroad and subsequently adopting policies that align with those predominant in the educational host country. Silva (1991), for example, uses the Latin American context to illustrate how individuals trained at the University of Chicago uniformly adopted a neoliberal approach to economic policy upon becoming government officials in Chile. Hainmueller and Hiscox (2006) have shown that it is not simply college education or the location of the educational institution that matters in predicting leaders' policy choices, but rather what those individuals studied.

Nieman and Allamong (2023) similarly find a connection between educational content and environment, that is, the values imparted by the institution, and policy outcomes. Their study was limited in scope to the export of liberal democratic values and consequently emphasized a university's autonomy from the state as part of the theoretical argument. Extending the core

argument, however, that educational setting and curriculum are indeed what matter in explaining elites' policy preferences, this theory should hold in more authoritarian contexts, including when discussing a state-controlled entity such as the RDA.

Indeed, answering Rosati and Miller's (2010) call for greater incorporation of psychological perspectives in FPA, prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979) provides a way of expanding the curricular content framework. Prospect theory holds that, when facing risk, humans evaluate outcomes in relation to an ideal reference point and decide which actions bring them closest to the ideal. In terms of prospect theory, the reference point for those individuals who studied at the RDA can reasonably be expected to shift closer to that of Russian diplomats, impacting how these Kazakhstani ambassadors characterize international relations with the countries they are posted to.

The assumption here is that modules taken while at the RDA create interpretations of proper role performance among RDA alumni not necessarily shared by diplomats trained elsewhere. For example, foreign policy elites might agree on Kazakhstan as Eurasian bridge but diverge in how they weigh the importance of different countries. Such differences could help explain the noted phenomenon of conception-performance gap (Elgström and Smith 2006, 248-49) in which foreign policy behavior does not match with national role conception.

This assessment of the international situation by ambassadors is important even in a country such as Kazakhstan with a "regime of one-man rule" and a highly personalized decision-making structure centered around former President Nursultan Nazarbayev (Kudaibergenova 2020, 11). Rulers with a predominant leadership style still require information when creating policy, even if they filter that information through their own worldview (Hermann and Hermann 1989, 365). Ambassadors are not simply external facing officials: while ambassadors serve as the representative of their country abroad, they have also long been key information channels,

relaying information to those making foreign policy at home (Drocourt 2012). As Kleiner (2008, 324) so aptly phrased it, “the diplomat is needed to assess the relevance of the information with regard to his country’s and the host country’s foreign policy ... [and] is also needed to assess the validity of his interlocutor’s statements.” Such information gathering and assessment has become an even more critical part of diplomatic responsibility with the rise of new communications technologies (Manor 2019, 290-92).

Given that state leaders are expected to seek to maximize their country’s autonomy of action (Hoffman 1965) even when operating from a disadvantageous position (Catalinac 2010), potential target countries should have a strong incentive to reduce the number of RDA alumni within their ambassadorial corps to limit the potential for soft power influence on their foreign policy making. However, this has not been a universal outcome, even when leaders are presented with a reasonably secure environment which would allow chipping away at bases of Russian soft power.

Such inconsistencies point to the possibility of the foreign policy role conceptions performed by elites impacting their state’s receptiveness toward bases of soft power and, thus, non-coercive influence attempts, independent of the international situation. Many less powerful countries pursue some form of omnibalancing (David 1991), taking advantage of the resources of competing major powers to further their own cause. In cases where such an approach is codified into the country’s foreign policy role—such as in Kazakhstan’s multi-vector strategy—I assert that national role conception and performance should better explain resistance or acquiescence to Russian soft power via diplomatic training than alternative, security-based arguments. Elites adhering to international roles mandating extensive engagement with multiple poles of power find it less pressing to actively undermine Russian soft power bases, as they can focus on the

benefits of cooperation with Russia rather than having to worry about undue influence from Moscow.

Making use of Russian expertise on diplomatic conduct does potentially provide a measure of agenda-setting power (Bachrach and Baratz 1962) to Russian elites, but it does not make politicians in the target country automatically beholden to those in Moscow. Rather, when there is the ready possibility of rejecting Russian influence attempts because relationships are being cultivated with multiple powers, it is more disadvantageous for countries to sacrifice the resources derived from the relationship with Russia, such as the subject expertise offered by the RDA, than to work around the increased potential for non-coercive influence.

Views on role theory and security in the literature:

When dealing with the educational/training background of individual members of a diplomatic corps as potential contributors to a reserve of Russian soft power, an FPA approach emphasizes thinking about how foreign policy is made and viewed by elites in the target state. Much of the literature on Russia's relations with Kazakhstan and other former Soviet republics has instead focused on structural factors, with a strong emphasis on Kazakhstan's material power shortcomings creating the need to rely on Russia for security (Sullivan 2019) while also fearing potential militant irredentism from the Russian state itself (Diener 2015). Collins (2014, 18) asserts that "regime survival, border security, and concrete economic incentives … determine the foreign policies of the Central Asian states." The request by Kazakhstani president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev for Russian troops under the banner of the Collective Security Treaty Organization to assist in putting down public unrest and a rumored coup plot in January 2022 only reinforced this *realpolitik* view of Kazakhstan as dependent upon its northern neighbor for security.

This depiction is overly deterministic, however. In terms of the security dimension, it is certainly the case that the military structure of the Soviet Union favored Slavs, mostly ethnic Russians, presenting the leaders of the newly independent republics in late 1991 with "a series of unsavory choices … when the time came to provide for their own security" (Beissinger 1997, 174). But, as unappealing as the various options may have been at times, policy choices ultimately have been made by these states in the intervening decades since the USSR's demise, with varying consequences.

While Kazakhstan remains beholden to Russian security assistance, other former Soviet republics have managed to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to grant them a fair measure of protection against potential Russian aggression. That is not to say this was a likely possibility for all the new states, but it illustrates that options existed other than remaining solely within the Russian security sphere. For its part, the Kazakhstani government, along with most of its Central Asian counterparts, joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), bringing another great power, China, in on regional security concerns. Beijing has preferred to use the SCO to facilitate economic arrangements rather than military ones (Lanteigne 2018), but even if the outcome was not ideal from Astana's perspective, this is an example of the multi-vector foreign policy (more on that below) pursued by Kazakhstani leaders as active parties navigating their country's position within the international structure.

Indeed, a key shortcoming of security-based explanations of foreign policy is that they often deny agency to less powerful countries. In the context of Eurasia, such concerns prompted Laruelle, Royce, and Beyssembayev (2019) to call for a less essentialized conception of Russian influence over Kazakhstan, and, by extension, other former Soviet republics. Most work on Russian soft power has focused on the Russian government's development and pursuit of soft power, either as a general foreign policy aim (e.g., Lankina and Niemczyk 2015) or in terms of

the benefits Russia reaps from cultivating soft power bases in specific countries or regions (e.g., Hudson 2022; Shaibakova 2019, both of which feature Kazakhstan as the target state).

Other than Cheskin's (2017) attempt to embrace an agentic view of soft power in the case of Ukraine, little work has been done on how states respond as targets of soft power, Russian or otherwise. Laruelle, Royce, and Beyssembayev (2019, 232) take an atheoretical view when it comes to the choices being made in Astana about managing Russian soft power, concluding that "when a vector is costless, or restraining it or eliminating it would have a higher cost than benefit, the vector is permitted or even reinforced." This argument implies that the RDA continues to exist as a soft power resource because changing course would be costly but provides no ready explanation of what might make a specific element costly to eliminate. One of the present article's key contributions is addressing this explanatory gap by applying role theory to the discussion of managing non-coercive external influence via soft power.

Roles provide an ideal framework for moving beyond sender state (often power politics) views and instead considering the decisions made by target states regarding how to deal with potential means of external influence. First introduced by Holsti (1970) and more fully developed into a proper theory in Walker (1987), the core claim of role theory is that each state has certain role conceptions that its leadership group attempts to perform internationally, although states often have multiple, potentially conflicting, roles (Balogh 2020). Since foreign policy roles are about presenting the country to and engaging with the world in a specific way, such as being a regional leader or bastion of revolution, role theory is usually invoked when studying how states attempt to influence their environment (for example, Thies [2014]) rather than when analyzing states as potential targets for outside influence.

At base, however, FPA, the approach with which role theory is associated, is about the decisions made regarding foreign policy: using role theory to examine agentic responses to

potential soft power thus represents a potentially promising new avenue for inquiry. There are limited extant lines of research into the relationship between foreign policy role and influence, such as the argument that there is an ascriptive component to foreign policy role adoption wherein foreigners attempt to impose certain views of another state's role(s) (Wehner 2015), but this work again does not make explicit the agency of the target state.

Still, this focus on exogenous influence is reasonable, as, although foreign policy roles are often derived from historical experiences to legitimize them domestically and abroad (Karim 2021), external concerns undoubtedly factor into role selection as well. For one thing, international status is an important consideration for major states (Larson and Shevchenko 2019) and their less influential counterparts (Varkočková 2021) alike, with diplomatic recognition and representation a key component of status conferral (Duque 2018). Adopting a role that will garner widespread acceptance is thus beneficial. Matters of security inevitably also play a part in the formation of foreign policy role, but even states in a weak bargaining position in terms of international security may still adopt a contentious attitude as a means of signaling resolve (Jervis 2001).

While initial work on role theory emphasized role conception independent of outside forces, Le Prestre (1997, 8) recognized that "self-conceptions [i.e., roles] can have internal and external origins" as states re-imagined themselves in relation to drastic changes in the international system following the Soviet Union's demise. This view aligns with the tenets of neoclassical realism, in which "state-level perceptions affect what policies leaders devise … in the face of structural incentives" (Foulon 2015, 648). As such, enacting a Russia-tolerant or Russia-centric stance as part of one's dominant foreign policy role could derive from an assessment by elites that the regime's or country's survival depends on good ties with Russia. It has been argued, for

example, that Kazakhstan's inability to move away from Russia stems from concerns about regime (in)security (Miller 2006).

Whatever the specific motive, once adopted, the responsibilities of performing the role may diverge from the demands of the geopolitical situation. Abb (2021), for example, argues that foreign policy role can impact how security goals are pursued, pointing to China's expanding involvement in peacekeeping missions to underscore claims by leaders of the Chinese Communist Party to being a peacefully rising power. Indeed, there can even be tensions between the logic of *realpolitik* and the compulsion to perform one's self-conceived role internationally (Blagden 2019). Soft power represents a promising topic of scholarship for investigating scenarios in which role theory might prove more fruitful than theories based primarily on security considerations.

Research design and case selection:

Like any resource, different types of soft power work best in different contexts. Tanks may be a poor choice for maritime warfare, but they are highly effective when deployed properly in land battles. In the same way, claims to being a bastion of a given transnational ideology or identity, such as democracy or pan-Arabism, can be a powerful form of soft power when dealing with like-minded leadership groups, but are not appropriate for an influence attempt in a locale where said ideology or identity is viewed unfavorably (Köse, Özcan, and Karakoç 2016). Material assets are perhaps more fungible in that, while not universally applicable, they can often be brought to bear equally well within their effective range, regardless of the domestic conditions in each target country. The type of soft power bases drawn upon during non-coercive influence attempts, on the other hand, are often more specific to the attributes of the target state. For that reason, the choice of case study when evaluating soft power is incredibly important.

To test the hypothesis that a bridging foreign policy role leads to the continued presence of RDA alumni as a Russian soft power base within a state's foreign policy elite, I will perform a qualitative case analysis of Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan makes for an interesting and pertinent country to investigate in this context because it represents a least-likely case for the theory that international role is more useful than security considerations for analyzing how target states respond to soft power bases. A least-likely case is a type of crucial case which is usually intended to confirm a theory by demonstrating "the extraordinary fit between the theory and a set of facts found in a single case, and the corresponding lack of fit between all other theories and this set of facts" (Gerring and Seawright 2006, 118).

Rohlfing (2012, 181)**,** however, has argued compellingly for understanding most- and least-likely cases from the perspective of the likelihood of finding supporting evidence within a case rather than solely considering the likelihood of (dis-)proving causality from a single case. Given how difficult it is to confirm a theory when evaluating only one case (Gerring and Seawright 2006, 119), my approach is instead to treat Kazakhstan as a case where evidence in favor of foreign policy role as the driver of the presence or absence of RDA alumni should be difficult to come by, given the broad consensus among scholars about the paramount importance of security concerns in explaining all aspects of Kazakhstani foreign policy-making.

Kazakhstan is a large, resource-rich country whose leadership group has actively pursued what it dubs a "multi-vector" foreign policy, in line with the principles of omnibalancing mentioned above. Like other Soviet republics, the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic's (KazSSR) republic-level foreign ministry; but all foreign policy decisions were made in Moscow (Zickel 1989, 345). While reforms in the final years of the Soviet Union increased the number of ethnic Kazakhs within the republic-level diplomatic service, and even allowed the republics to send representatives abroad in the final year of the USSR, only upon becoming an independent

country at the very end of 1991 did the newly established Republic of Kazakhstan gain full and functional control over its relations with other polities (Abazov 1998, 38–40). President Nazarbayev started fresh by replacing the acting KazSSR foreign minister with Kazakhstan's first Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tuleutay Suleymenov.

However, "actors do not inherit a blank slate that they can remake at will when their preferences shift or unintended consequences become visible" (Pierson 2000, 493). This initial effort to distinguish the foreign policy apparatus from its Soviet antecedent was important symbolically, but the new guard, including Suleymenov, was nonetheless a product of the Soviet system, which had been dominated by Russia and ethnic Russians. In an attempt to avoid being beholden to a single powerful state—in this case Kazakhstan's former colonizer, Russia—the Kazakhstani government has fostered ties with China, the United States, and countries within the European Union, casting itself as the "Eurasian bridge" and actively seeking to keep the country at a healthy distance from Russia, at least rhetorically (Gleason 2010).

Karabayeva (2021, 29) notes that the concept of the Eurasian bridge has existed as a central part of Kazakhstani policymaking since the initial foreign policy strategy of the republic was laid out in 1992, morphing into the multi-vector terminology in the early 2000s. Abazov (2000, qtd in Cummings 2003, 148) found that the Eurasian bridge was the predominant self-identification among Kazakhstani elites. Indeed, Nazarbayev has often emphasized the fact he is credited with first voicing the idea of a Eurasian union, later given form in the Eurasian Economic Union (KazInform 2019).

This self-presentation matches with Holsti's (1970, 296–97) depiction of both independent and bridging foreign policy roles. Nevertheless, central as the Eurasian bridge idea is within Kazakhstani elite discourse, it also entails the county fostering good ties with Russia (Varkočková 2021). Unlike countries such as Estonia or Georgia, where large segments of the

populace along with major political figures have engaged in vocal anti-Russian rhetoric and have sought to actively renounce any association with Russia (Kakachia, Minesashvili, and Kakhishvili 2018; Mölder 2014), Kazakhstani policymakers have instead worked gradually toward increasing their autonomy from potential external influence attempts while reaping the benefits of extensive cooperation. Such a foreign policy approach aligns with the national role conception of bridging. I argue that it also, however, results in a continued flow of Kazakhstani diplomats to Moscow for professional training.

Yet, once arrived in Moscow, there are different tracks one can pursue at the RDA, ranging from enrolling in a course or two to completing an entire doctoral program in foreign affairs. While a thorough exploration of how the RDA as a soft power resource might be converted into leverage during an influence attempt merits further research, it is beyond the scope of the current article. Based on the theoretical mechanism outlined above, however, worldview shifts via curricular content and educational environment are more likely to occur during an extended term at the RDA. I therefore focus on the more restrictive condition of completing a degree at the RDA but also run the analysis using a more relaxed specification requiring only that an individual completed a course at the RDA. I anticipate that the Kazakhstani government should be more open to promoting individuals who completed stints at the RDA to enhance their credentials, but who did not spend the time needed to earn a degree immersed in the political culture of Moscow.

There is also the question of whether to focus on shifting patterns of RDA alumni presence within the Kazakhstani ambassadorial corps or to simply treat it as a binary outcome of Kazakhstan either having or not having ambassadors with prior diplomatic training in Moscow. I have chosen the latter, as any RDA alumni within the ambassadorial corps represent components of a soft power base upon which Russian leaders can draw. However, I do divide the overall

corps into three cohorts: according to the generational model of political learning, formative early life political events for different age cohorts color their respective perceptions of politics in a lasting manner (Bartels and Jackman 2014).

Building on this logic, I will be examining three age brackets which ought to have different impressions of the world and how foreign policy works: individuals who were 35+ years old on January 1, 1992, those who were between 21 and 34 years of age (inclusive) at that time, and those who were 20 or younger, at the moment of independence. Breaking the ambassadorial corps down into these three groups is intended to capture any differences between those more senior members of the KazSSR who continued in the service of the independent Republic of Kazakhstan, those who were early in their foreign service career at the time of statehood, and those who were still adolescents and had had no direct, substantive exposure to the Soviet model of governance. The seniority cut-off was chosen as only 2 of 186 ambassadors were appointed to serve as ambassadors prior to turning 35.

Peyrouse (2016, 50–52) has found that willingness to promote a younger generation of non-establishment officials was a hallmark of Nazarbayev's strategy for preventing entrenched elites from consolidating power. This is in line with the authoritarian loyalty-competence trade-off, as outlined by Egorov and Sonin (2011), in which an autocratic leader must be weigh the costs and benefits between the expertise of long-serving officials who have had time to gather their own base of support versus assigning less experienced officials to posts to reduce the threat of a coup.

For this study, it is significant whether this pattern of elevating a younger cadre of elites holds within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Such individuals would have been able to advance through the ranks without inherently needing to rely on a professional network linked closely to Moscow, unlike their forebears who started in the Soviet period. These younger

diplomats also presumably ought to be more dedicated to the idea of an independent Kazakhstan and less beholden to a conceptual framework with Russia as the main geopolitical referent.

In line with the general trend within international relations research to adopt a mixed methods approach that leverages the benefits of different methodologies (Goertz 2016; Thaler 2017), I support my qualitative case study approach with quantitative logistic regression and subsequent predictive modeling of patterns of ambassadorial postings. Using these statistical modeling tools will enable me to assess whether RDA alumni are being sent to prominent destinations—defined as neighbors, fellow former Soviet republics, major powers, and top trade partners (see below for more details on these latter two categories)—which would further enhance the RDA as a soft power base. For robustness, I will also analyze the numbers when limiting the scope to actual completion of a diplomatic credentialing degree program. This second test will create a higher threshold to pass and make my estimates of RDA shares more conservative.

The objective is to take a holistic view of the period 1992-2021 to determine whether patterns of RDA alumni share within the Kazakhstani ambassadorial corps are inconsistent, clustered around periods of security concerns and required closeness to Russia, or whether they exhibit trends more in line with my argument about Kazakhstan's foreign policy role allowing its governmental leaders to be comfortable making use of the RDA as a resource for improving the capabilities of their diplomatic personnel.

Data analysis:

To conduct my analysis of the RDA as a source of Russian soft power in Kazakhstan, I have compiled a dataset of all Kazakhstani ambassadors since 1992, when the country sent its first official representative abroad. This dataset will allow me to draw inferences about the extent of Russian soft power in the context of Russo-Kazakhstani relations. For the purposes of space,

more detailed information on the dataset can be found in the appendix, but Figure 1 highlights key descriptive statistics regarding the total number of posts and ambassadors per year, as well as details about year-over-year consistency and change within the ambassadorial corps. There tends to be a fair bit of ambassadorial shuffling each year, as well as numerous dual postings. The chart also offers a sense of diplomatic training backgrounds, either at the RDA or elsewhere: while not a majority, individuals with some formal training represent a significant subset of the overall population, with the RDA the most popular choice.

<Figure 1 approximately here>

Getting more granular, Figure 2 includes information on the share of all ambassadors who studied at the RDA across each of the three age brackets discussed in the methods section. These descriptive statistics paint an interesting picture: while the total number of RDA alumni has been relatively low, never exceeding ten individuals in a year, there have been at least two every year since 1993. In terms of overall ambassadorial corps share, the numbers range from 11-25%, with the average annual figure for RDA representation at 16%.

<Figure 2 approximately here>

There are two interrelated trends that stand out in the data. First, there has inevitably been a changing of the guard over the course of three decades, but evidence of an artificially sped up process is scant. While the older generation of diplomats from the KazSSR period were relied upon in the earliest years of independence, as Kazakhstan moved forward, expanding the number of countries with which it formed diplomatic relations, the younger cohort was beginning to replace their Soviet-era counterparts. This transition took place during the mid-2000s, and a similar phenomenon appears to be underway currently. The last members of the original ambassadorial corps are retiring from service or passing away, while the individuals who were adolescents when Kazakhstan became a sovereign country are taking up ambassadorial postings

in larger and larger numbers and should overtake the original 21-34 cohort in terms of representation by the mid-to-late 2020s.

If a generation lasts approximately 15-20 years, this timeline makes sense: the first changing of the guard took place from 2006-07, around 16 years after independence. The second generation has lasted slightly longer but is on pace to be supplanted by the third generation before the 40th anniversary of Kazakhstani statehood. The patterns for the expanded presence of both the second and third generations have been gradual in nature, rather than any sudden spikes which would indicate an attempt to recompose the foreign policy elite either to reduce the prevalence of Russia-trained personnel or to undermine potential rivals to Nazarbayev or Tokayev.

The one outlier is the relatively steep drop in the share of the 35+ cohort between 2016 and 2017. An investigation of these individuals reveals that most were reassigned to different posts within the government rather than retiring or dying. Given that this would have been as Nazarbayev was considering potential successors, perhaps this represents a reshuffling intended to clear the way for Tokayev to assume power a mere two years later without causing in-fighting within the Foreign Ministry.

Beyond this one instance, however, there is no indication that foreign policy elites are regularly cycled in and out in a way that minimizes the role of RDA alumni in offering input on foreign policy matters if a Russian influence attempt took place. This leads to the second, and most important, observation: studying at the RDA remains a consistent feature across all cohorts. There is a clear reduction in share as one moves from the Soviet generation to the younger cohorts, yet, despite the ballooning in size of the two most recent cohorts, the presence of RDA alumni in the ambassadorial corps remains steady at 5-8 individuals per year.

Counter-intuitively, rather than a general decrease, the trend seen in Figure 2 in each of the two more recent cohorts is for the number of RDA alumni to slowly increase over time. Overall, despite relatively stringent benchmarks in terms of what counts as an RDA-trained ambassador, the RDA clearly has served and continues to serve as a priority training destination for all 3 cohorts, even those whose careers started well into the independence period, indicating that Kazakhstani officials have no qualms about making use of the training available to diplomats to improve the foreign service.

<Figure 3 approximately here>

For comparison, Figure 3 also shows the total number of ambassadors who received training at Kazakhstan's own diplomatic academy, originally opened in 1997 before eventually merging into the Presidential Academy of Public Administration (APA) in 2005. Most striking is that from the time the 21-34 cohort saw its first APA graduate assigned the rank of ambassador in 2006, the distribution of RDA and APA trainees remained extremely balanced until 2018, when there was a drop in APA alumni. This shift occurred the year before Tokayev took power. The reasons for this sudden change merit further investigation, as perhaps this is further indication of a subtle reshuffling of the foreign service to preemptively ease any tensions when naming the Minister of Foreign Affairs as the presidential successor and thereby creating a power vacuum within the MFA.

In any event, Tokayev's *alma mater*, the RDA, has held approximately a 2-to-1 overall advantage over the APA since 2018, but, among the youngest cohort, APA graduates have slightly outnumbered their RDA-trained counterparts since 2020. This is in stark contrast to the KazSSR cohort, which never really had a domestic diplomatic training option, and thus only ever had one APA alumni across the entire 30-year timeline under review.

Nor is there evidence to support a counterargument that RDA alumni's prominence within the Kazakhstani ambassadorial corps is a matter of security considerations such as proximity or material power. Only 8 of 186 ambassadors attended a diplomatic training academy other than the RDA or the APA. If geopolitical considerations as part of a multi-vector foreign policy were important in explaining where Kazakhstani diplomats receive their training, the China Foreign Affairs University, which offers courses to foreign service personnel from other countries (CFAU 2016), ought to feature prominently in the dataset as well. Instead, the lingering ties from the Soviet era make Russia the external destination of choice for Kazakhstani diplomats seeking to enhance their credentials.

Moreover, the period from 2001, when the United States invaded Afghanistan, until the Tulip Revolution in neighboring Kyrgyzstan in 2005 featured an *increase* in the number of RDA graduates in the Kazakhstani ambassadorial corps. This stretch represented the greatest window of opportunity, security-wise, to change course and undermine the RDA as a soft power base. The Nazarbayev regime was secure, and American troops in the region provided an alternative security option in the early 2000s as part of the so-called War on Terror (Cooley 2014), even staging joint exercises with Kazakhstani forces (D'Orazio and Galambos 2021).

Not only was there a potential alternative great power security partner operating in Central Asia, but Russia's failure to intervene on behalf of Askar Akaev's regime in Kyrgyzstan, despite Moscow's own foreign policy role as guarantor of regional order and stability (Strycharz 2022, 182-88), cast doubt on how reliable a partner Russia would be in the event of a security crisis. Such a development should have made alternative partnership options even more enticing. Yet, even allowing for the possibility Kazakhstan's elites anticipated that the United States would eventually lose interest in Central Asia again, nothing was made of this suddenly expanded room for geopolitical maneuver, at least in terms of reducing the soft power base that is RDA. Instead

of a diversification of diplomatic training destinations, the posting of Russia-trained diplomats continued apace, further solidifying the RDA's role.

<Figure 4 approximately here>

In fact, the quantitative modeling results indicate that the Kazakhstani government may be further enhancing the Russian soft power base by posting RDA alumni to prominent embassies, increasing their stature within the foreign policy elite. Table 1 shows the results of a pair of logit models intended to capture the impact of the independent variable (IV), receiving RDA or APA training, on the dependent variable (DV) of serving in prestigious ambassadorial postings, defined as being named ambassador to a country traditionally viewed as a great power, a top-10 trading partner of Kazakhstan's, or an immediate neighbor.

Figure 4 indicates the availability and distribution of prestigious postings; as can be seen, RDA alumni hold the largest number of prestigious posts across the entire 30-year period, with one tie, in 2019. The first two of these categories capture broad geopolitical concerns, while being stationed in a neighboring country provides much greater access to the domestic political scene and thus greater potential influence at home for such diplomats. For the diplomatic training variable, having no formal diplomatic training served as the reference category: in lay terms, the model outputs reflect increases or decreases in the likelihood of receiving a prestigious posting compared to those who never attended a diplomatic academy in any capacity.

<Table 1 approximately here>

Model 1 uses the more demanding requirement of completing a degree while Model 2 uses the less stringent definition of simple attendance at a diplomatic academy. The models controlled for an individual's age and whether the ambassador had more total years of experience at the time of posting than the dataset average of 12 years, along with dummy variables for whether s/he had held the same post the previous year, if the individual served as Foreign

Minister at some point, and, finally, whether the person was born in the current or former capital city (Astana or Almaty, respectively), since such individuals would likely have more ready access to elite political networks and resources.

The results of the two models indicate a positive and strongly significant correlation between receiving training at the RDA and being assigned to a more prestigious posting. Looking at the marginal effects in Table 1, the predicted probability of netting a high-status ambassadorial position increases by approximately 8.8% for those who attended the RDA and by over 10.4% for those who completed a full training program at the RDA. Contrary to expectations, diplomats who spent more time at the RDA are more likely than any other group to receive a prestigious posting. Interestingly, the only other variables to reach statistical significance all exhibit a negative correlation with higher-profile ambassadorships: years of experience, being born near a capital city, and, in Model 2, spending time at the APA.

Despite having created a potential domestic competitor to reduce the need for the RDA and thereby undermine a prominent soft power base for Russia within the Kazakhstani foreign policy elite, there has been no apparent effort to prioritize graduates of APA as an internal training institution. One possible explanation is that Russian diplomatic acumen is seen as more desirable than similar training in Kazakhstan.

Another possible implication of these findings, however, is that an RDA background may be a handicap within the domestic political structure: after all, those individuals having more experience, more developed political networks, and national rather than foreign diplomatic training are the ones largely excluded from prestigious postings. Figure 5 shows an unreported model testing the conditional relationship between diplomatic training and level of experience on prestigious postings. RDA alumni are more likely to hold prestigious postings when they are less experienced. Further research is needed to understand these trends, but the initial indication is

that RDA alumni are promoted in a manner that maintains the Kazakhstani government's ability to act as an agent of its own interests by limiting the clout of RDA alumni once they are more established as foreign policy elites. This aligns with strategically impeding elites' opportunities to consolidate power, similar to Woldense's (2018) study of elite shuffling in Haile Selassie's Ethiopia.[1]

<Figure 5 approximately here>

Whatever the case, the situation seems to be one in which the RDA as a soft power base is not considered a major concern within the Kazakhstani MFA. While working to build up the capacity of their own training infrastructure, Kazakhstani elites have been more than happy to seize the opportunity afforded by a multi-vector foreign policy role that promotes balanced engagement with Russia to receive high-quality training in a neighboring country. These findings indicate that Kazakhstani policymakers are not simply acting in accordance with a Soviet-era hierarchy centered around Moscow. Even if RDA alumni may have a different reference point than their colleagues, they are still exercising agency as representatives of Kazakhstan.

To test this proposition, I ran a final analysis of the relation between the number of RDA alumni in the ambassadorial corps and Kazakhstan's foreign policy behavior in the form of United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) voting, drawn from the 'unvotes' package in R (which originated from data provided in Voeten [2013]) and covering the years 1992 through the end of 2019. UNGA roll call outcomes have previously been used to measure the extent of dependence, for example, Flores-Macías and Kreps's (2013) assessment of China's influence on Latin American via increased trade reliance.

<Figure 6 approximately here>

[1] Soviet rulers used ambassadorial posts to "exile" political rivals (Uldricks 1979, 135), a practice that Nazarbayev also used in the early years of consolidating his reign (Alexandrov 1999, 3-10).

Figure 6 shows the percent of overlapping votes for Russia and Kazakhstan from 1992-2019; that is, roll calls in which both countries cast the same vote. It is clear visually that, despite relatively high levels of convergence between Russian and Kazakhstani UNGA votes, Kazakhstani leaders still exercise agency in pursuing their own country's interests. Moreover, the rate of overlap has decreased in recent years, indicating that Kazakhstan's multi-vector (bridging) foreign policy role enables foreign policy elites to go against Russian interests in many cases without needing to give up the benefits accrued from access to the RDA.

Figure 7 underscores this point, showing the linear relationship between the percentage of the ambassadorial corps who attended the RDA and UNGA vote overlap through 2017 on issues deemed "important" by the United States Department of State. Such votes mean Russian leaders are likely to have an added incentive to exert influence on countries such as Kazakhstan to ensure a voting bloc against American geopolitical interests. Yet there is no discernible impact of RDA diplomats on Astana's foreign policy behavior in the form of UNGA votes, with an almost flat line and no statistically significant correlation established (coefficient: 0.215; standard error: 0.831).[2] The evidence thus points to a scenario in which Kazakhstani elites accept the RDA as a Russian soft power resource because the RDA is advantageous to them without jeopardizing the autonomy of the state in setting its own agenda.

<Figure 7 approximately here>

Concluding discussion:

Ultimately, while 70 years of Soviet dominion left Kazakhstan and other newly independent states in Eurasia in a position of dependence upon and affiliation with Russia, "the primary responsibility for overcoming the consequences of that dependence resides with these [former

[2] The regression results are similarly insignificant, statistically, after restricting the sample to 2005-2017, when relations between Moscow and Washington started deteriorating following the Tulip Revolution (coefficient: 0.964; standard error: 1.286).

republics] themselves" (Dawisha 1997, 358). The compiled ambassadorial data show a recent shift toward a more broadly Kazakhstani foreign service, with increasing numbers of APA alumni making their way into the upper ranks of the foreign service, but Russia retains a noteworthy soft power base for influencing Kazakhstani policy in the form of RDA alumni within Kazakhstan's ambassadorial corps.

This source of soft power has persisted regardless of the security environment over time and is further magnified by the personnel assignment choices made within the Kazakhstani MFA, which seem to privilege those with prior RDA training over domestically trained diplomats. Combined, these two aspects make clear that no serious attempt has been made to eradicate or even significantly weaken the role of the RDA as a diplomatic hub over the past 30 years. Excluding 1992, when only three ambassadorial posts were filled, Russia has continued to provide diplomatic credentials for anywhere from 11-25% of the total Kazakhstani ambassadorial corps, and there is fluctuation in that figure rather than a continuous decline over time. Among Foreign Ministers, the total is three former RDA students out of nine total ministers with none of those nine having completed any training at the APA.

The potential ramifications of foreign-influenced diplomats have not gone unnoticed in the halls of power in Kazakhstan. Two months prior to the internal turmoil in Kazakhstan at the outset of 2022, President Tokayev expressed his displeasure with the resistance to change within the Kazakhstani MFA and stressed the need to expand the pool of qualified foreign service candidates, with patriotism and fluency in the Kazakh language among the key aspects Tokayev focused on (Tengri News 2021). Yet recognizing the potential concern of having RDA and other foreign-trained alumni in the ambassadorial corps does not mean a ready solution is at hand. A significant change in the composition of a country's foreign policy elite can significantly impact the direction of its foreign policy decisions (Aydinli and Erpul 2021). With the ascension of each

successive cohort to the ambassadorial corps, an opportunity arose to restrict appointments for RDA alumni and promote domestically trained diplomats.

However, as of the time of this writing, no effort has been made to slow the promotion of RDA alumni to high-ranking diplomatic posts. I have argued that this apparently counter-intuitive result can be explained with reference to role theory and the country's chosen role as an independent bridge cooperating with multiple major powers across geopolitical and ideological divides. Patterns of RDA attendance among the ambassadorial corps cannot be attributed to geopolitical considerations, as the number and share of RDA alumni has been remarkably stable over time. Instead, in line with the logic of omnibalancing, Kazakhstani elites make the most of the resources made available to them through engagement with powerful states, while avoiding overly close ties to any one power which might create dependency and avenues for the abuse of hard and soft power resources by an outside actor.

Changing geopolitical realities may prompt a reconsideration of Kazakhstan's foreign policy role, however. Kazakhstan had been moving increasingly closer to Russia since the change of president from Nazarbayev to Tokayev (Isaacs 2020), but the increasingly aggressive foreign policy choices made by President Vladimir Putin's regime in Russia, highlighted most starkly by Russian actions in Ukraine since February 2022, has already prompted Kazakhstan's own leadership group to reconsider how advisable it is to include Russia on the list of foreign policy vectors (Auyezov 2022). This process should presumably lead to efforts to reduce or eliminate the presence of bases of Russian power within the country as Kazakhstan's government becomes less and less comfortable with the prospect of coercive and non-coercive Russian influence attempts.

For now, though, shares of RDA alumni within Kazakhstan's ambassadorial corps remain in the double-digits thirty-plus years after independence, with no fewer than 5 RDA graduates in

the corps every year since 1997. Kazakhstan's position as a resource-rich state bordering China and in a region that became of considerable interest to the United States for several years gives its leaders more leeway to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy role and allow others to accrue soft power resources within the country. However, Kazakhstan is far from the only country which attempts to engage with competing great powers to maximize benefits.

Further research is needed to investigate whether the claims made herein apply in these other instances as well. The dynamics of how foreign policy role changes impact soft power response strategies, for example, is beyond the scope of the current work. The argument advanced is not one of path dependency (North 1990): the respective foreign policy roles adopted by different states may drive policymaking, but states select into those roles, and can alter them if the international situation calls for it. Ukraine would thus be a highly fruitful case to investigate as a country that underwent phases of pro-West and pro-Russian leadership before 2014 but maintained a foreign policy role that initially required stable relations with Russia, until a much more unwavering pro-West/anti-Russia role was adopted by the Ukrainian government in response to crises in the Donbas and Crimea. This post-2014 evolution would be an excellent test of the argument about the relationship between countries' respective foreign policy roles and level of willingness to tolerate soft power bases such as the RDA.

Similarly, while this argument was developed about and in the context of former Soviet republics, there is every reason to believe it should apply in a broader international relations context. Diplomatic academies represent noteworthy sources of potential soft power, especially for former (and contemporary?) imperial powers; future work might thus consider other institutions like the RDA, such as the status of France's Center for Diplomatic & Strategic Studies (Centre d'Etudes Diplomatiques et Stratégiques) in training diplomats from formerly French colonies. Any such research, however, must emphasize that other states ultimately choose

how they wish to engage with such soft power bases, rather than acting merely as passive recipients of influence. Developing a typology of the varying strategies countries have for engaging with the non-coercive influence potential of counterparts is an important next step in the study of soft power, and FPA role theory offers an excellent explanatory framework for doing so.

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Table 1: Prestigious Postings Logit Model Regression Results

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coefficients	Marginal Effects	Coefficients	Marginal Effects
RDA Attendance	–	-	0.436972* (0.137679)	0.08781
RDA Degree	0.514477*** (0.140483)	0.1043	–	-
APA Attendance	–	-	-0.633090* (0.28869)	-0.09751
APA Degree	-0.529515 (0.290772)	-0.08343	-	-
Other Dip. Academy	-13.659329 (359.968812)	-0.2451	-0.121936 (0.436398)	-0.02161
Experienced	-0.664329*** (0.121533)	-0.1229	-0.643143*** (0.12110)	-0.1192
Same as Prior Year Posting	0.199115 (0.122278)	0.03682	0.195729 (0.122124)	0.03627
Age on January 1	-0.004304 (0.007985)	-0.0007959	-0.005120 (0.007978)	-0.000949
Served as Foreign Minister	0.044420 (0.184409)	0.008214	0.065350 (0.183692)	0.01211
Born in a Capital City	-0.334092* (0.150909)	-0.06178	-0.329222* (0.151099)	-0.06101
Constant	-0.795925 (0.411460)		-0.749206 (0.411060)	
Observations	2027		2027	

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.
*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01 * p < 0.05 (two-tailed)