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Actual Problems of the Present

№3 (53)

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Strategic autonomy in a fragmenting world order: Kazakhstan and Mexico in comparative perspective, with lessons from Türkiye and Brazil

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Abstract

This article compares how Kazakhstan and Mexico preserve political agency under structurally asymmetric interdependence, using Türkiye and Brazil as secondary reference cases. It develops negotiated autonomy as a middle-range concept for secondary and Global South powers that cannot eliminate dependence but can sometimes reorganize it. The study integrates constructivist, poststructuralist, decolonial, and Latin American autonomy traditions while assigning each a distinct analytical function. Methodologically, it uses a structured qualitative comparison of official foreign-policy documents, leadership statements, trade and integration data, and recent peer-reviewed research from 2020-2026. Evidence is coded across five dimensions: concentration of dependence, partner diversification, multilateral strategy, narrative sovereignty, and demonstrated capacity for selective resistance. The comparison shows that Kazakhstan institutionalizes autonomy through multivectorism and visible post-2022 resistance on questions of territorial recognition; Mexico retains diplomatic room for maneuver despite extreme North American economic integration, including issue-specific disagreement with Washington-centered policy responses. Türkiye illustrates the possibilities and political-economic limits of assertive autonomy, while Brazil represents autonomy through diversification and active non-alignment traditions. The article further distinguishes diplomatic from infrastructural autonomy and identifies scope conditions under which diversification ceases to generate meaningful agency. Negotiated autonomy therefore explains not independence from interdependence, but the variable capacity to prevent asymmetry from becoming automatic political obedience.

Keywords: strategic autonomy, Kazakhstan, Mexico, multipolarity, Global South.

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Аңдатпа

Бұл мақала құрылымдық асимметрия жағдайында Қазақстан мен Мексиканың саяси агенттікті қалай сақтайтынын салыстырады; Түркия мен Бразилия қосымша салыстырмалы мысалдар ретінде қолданылады. Зерттеу тәуелділікті толық жоя алмайтын, бірақ оны белгілі бір дәрежеде қайта ұйымдастыра алатын Жаһандық Оңтүстік пен екінші дәрежелі державалар үшін «келісілген автономия» ұғымын орта деңгейлі аналитикалық концепт ретінде ұсынады. Теориялық бөлім конструктивизмді, постструктурализмді, деколониалдық көзқарасты және

Латын Америкасындағы автономия дәстүрін біріктіреді, бірақ олардың әрқайсысына нақты аналитикалық міндет жүктейді. Әдістемелік тұрғыдан 2020-2026 жылдардағы ресми сыртқы саясат құжаттары, мемлекет басшыларының мәлімдемелері, сауда және интеграциялық деректер, сондай-ақ рецензияланған ғылыми әдебиет негізінде құрылымдалған сапалық салыстыру жүргізіледі. Материал бес өлшем бойынша талданады: тәуелділіктің шоғырлануы, серіктестерді әртараптандыру, көпжақты стратегия, егемендік нарративі және үстем серіктестің қысымына таңдамалы түрде қарсы тұру қабілеті. Нәтижелер Қазақстанның көпвекторлы саясат арқылы автономияны институционалдандырғанын және 2022 жылдан кейін аумақтық мойындау мәселесінде дербес ұстаным көрсеткенін анықтайды. Мексика АҚШ-пен өте терең экономикалық интеграцияға қарамастан, дипломатиялық маневр кеңістігін және кейбір мәселелер бойынша дербес позициясын сақтайды. Түркия белсенді автономияның мүмкіндіктері мен экономикалық шектеулерін, ал Бразилия әртараптандыру және белсенді қосылмау дәстүрін көрсетеді. Мақала дипломатиялық және инфрақұрылымдық автономияны ажыратып, әртараптандырудың саяси агенттік өндіру қабілеті жоғалатын шектерді де талдайды. Ұсынылған «желісілген автономия» ұғымы тәуелділіктен толық шығуды емес, асимметрияның автоматты саяси бағынуға айналуына жол бермейтін әртараптандырылған қатынастарды, көпжақты институттарды, егемендік нарративтерін және материалдық баламаларды үйлестіру қабілетін түсіндіреді. Осы тұрғыдан зерттеу шағын және орта державалардың агенттігін ұлы державалар бәсекесінің жай ғана нәтижесі емес, белсенді саяси практика ретінде қарастырады.

Кілт сөздер: стратегиялық автономия, Қазақстан, Мексика, көпполярлылық, жаһандық Оңтүстік.

Стратегическая автономия в фрагментирующемся мировом порядке: сравнительный анализ Казахстана и Мексики с учетом опыта Турции и Бразилии

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Аннотация

Статья сравнивает, каким образом Казахстан и Мексика сохраняют политическую субъектность в условиях структурно асимметричной взаимозависимости; Турция и Бразилия используются как дополнительные сравнительные случаи. Предлагается концепт «согласованной автономии» как аналитическая категория среднего уровня для второстепенных держав и стран Глобального Юга, которые не способны устранить зависимость, но могут частично перестраивать ее структуру. Теоретическая рамка объединяет конструктивизм, постструктурализм, деколониальный подход и латиноамериканскую традицию автономии, при этом каждой традиции отводится отдельная аналитическая функция. Метод основан на структурированном качественном сравнении официальных внешнеполитических документов, заявлений руководителей, данных о торговле и интеграции, а также современной рецензируемой литературы за 2020-2026 годы. Материал анализируется по пяти измерениям: концентрация зависимости, диверсификация партнеров, многосторонняя стратегия, нарратив суверенитета и продемонстрированная способность к избирательному сопротивлению давлению доминирующего партнера. Результаты показывают, что Казахстан институционализирует автономию посредством многовекторности и после 2022 года демонстрирует самостоятельность по вопросам территориального признания. Мексика, несмотря на исключительно глубокую экономическую интеграцию с США, сохраняет

дипломатическое пространство для маневра и способность к несогласию по отдельным вопросам. Турция демонстрирует возможности и политико-экономические пределы более активной автономии, а Бразилия — традицию автономии через диверсификацию и активное неприсоединение. Статья также различает дипломатическую и инфраструктурную автономию и определяет условия, при которых диверсификация перестает обеспечивать значимую политическую субъектность. Предлагаемая «согласованная автономия» объясняет не освобождение от взаимозависимости, а способность сочетать диверсифицированные связи, многосторонние институты, нарративы суверенитета и материальные альтернативы так, чтобы структурная асимметрия не превращалась автоматически в политическое подчинение. Тем самым агентность второстепенных держав рассматривается как активная политическая практика, а не как простой результат конкуренции великих держав.

Ключевые слова: стратегическая автономия, Казахстан, Мексика, многополярность, глобальный Юг.

1. Introduction

Strategic autonomy has returned to the vocabulary of international politics because the post-Cold War expectation of an increasingly integrated liberal order has given way to great-power rivalry, economic coercion, sanctions, supply-chain securitization, and competing regional projects. Yet the concept is still frequently discussed as though autonomy were mainly a privilege of the European Union or of states with major military capabilities. This article starts from a different premise: autonomy is analytically most revealing where dependence cannot simply be removed. Secondary powers and Global South states often remain deeply embedded in unequal relationships while simultaneously seeking room for independent diplomatic action (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2026; Fortin et al., 2023).

Kazakhstan and Mexico provide a deliberately demanding comparison. Kazakhstan is geographically embedded between Russia and China, relies on regional security and transport structures shaped by its post-Soviet environment, and simultaneously cultivates relations with the European Union, the United States, Türkiye, and Asian partners. Mexico is economically integrated with the United States to a degree that makes simple diversification much more difficult: in 2024, more than 80% of Mexican goods exports went to the United States, while more than 40% of Mexican goods imports came from that market (Office of the United States Trade Representative, n.d.). These cases are therefore not equivalent; their value lies precisely in structured contrast between two different forms of structural asymmetry.

The article asks: how do Kazakhstan and Mexico preserve political agency without abandoning relationships on which their prosperity and security partly depend? The argument is that autonomy should be understood as negotiated rather than absolute. Negotiated autonomy is the capacity to manage asymmetric interdependence through diversified relationships, multilateral institutions, sovereignty-producing narratives, infrastructural alternatives, and demonstrated selective resistance. Türkiye and Brazil are used as secondary reference cases. Türkiye illustrates a more assertive strategy whose sustainability depends on political-economic foundations (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2026), while Brazil represents the Latin American tradition of autonomy through diversification and contemporary active non-alignment (Fortin et al., 2023; Vigevani & Cepaluni, 2007).

The contribution is threefold. First, the article places strategic autonomy in a Global South and secondary-power setting rather than treating it as a great-power attribute. Second, it distinguishes negotiated autonomy from hedging, multivectorism, non-alignment, and autonomy through diversification. Third, it separates diplomatic autonomy from infrastructural autonomy, thereby explaining why a state may sustain independent positions in multilateral or symbolic domains while remaining materially constrained in trade, finance, energy, transport, or technology. This distinction is particularly useful for Mexico and Kazakhstan, where autonomy is real but uneven across issue areas.

The argument also extends the author's previous research on connectivity governance and regional agency. Work on Kazakhstan and Türkiye shows that transport corridors become politically useful only when institutions, regulatory practices, and reputational credibility make alternatives usable rather than merely symbolic (İşcan, 2026a). Related studies on Uzbekistan-Latin America relations and Georgia-Türkiye connectivity similarly emphasize diversification and institutional visibility as mechanisms through which non-hegemonic states widen external options (İşcan, 2026b, 2026c). The present article moves from those sectoral mechanisms to a broader conceptual question: under what conditions do multiple external relationships produce political autonomy rather than simply multiple dependencies?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Integrating the theoretical traditions

The first theoretical tradition is constructivist. Autonomy is not only a distribution of material capabilities; it is also an identity claim. Wendt (1992) demonstrates that interests and identities are produced through social interaction rather than given independently of it. In the present analysis, constructivism is operationalized through the dimension of narrative sovereignty: recurring official languages of sovereignty, non-intervention, multivectorism, or plural belonging are treated as evidence that independent action has become part of the state's legitimate foreign-policy identity.

The second tradition is poststructuralist. Foreign policy does not simply defend a pre-existing political identity; it also helps constitute the boundaries of that identity by distinguishing acceptable cooperation from unacceptable dependence (Campbell, 1998; Hansen, 2006). Here, poststructuralism is used to interpret how official discourse frames hierarchy, pressure, alignment, and sovereign choice. It is therefore not coded as a separate numerical variable. Its analytical function is interpretive: it explains why the same material relationship can be narrated as partnership, necessity, vulnerability, or subordination.

The third tradition comes from Latin American autonomy theory. Vigevani and Cepaluni (2007) distinguish autonomy through distance, participation, and diversification, showing that room for maneuver can be expanded not only by withdrawing from dominant institutions but also by multiplying partnerships and coalition options. Russell and Tokatlian's (2013) idea of non-acquiescence similarly emphasizes agency without requiring isolation. In this article, the Latin American autonomy tradition is directly operationalized through partner diversification, multilateral strategy, and selective resistance.

Decolonial and dependency-oriented perspectives provide a fourth layer. Quijano (2000) and Mignolo (2011) draw attention to the fact that formal sovereignty can coexist with deeply unequal material and epistemic structures. Their role in the article is primarily contextual rather than a standalone coded dimension: they inform the interpretation of dependence concentration and explain why Global South autonomy must be evaluated against historically produced hierarchies rather than against an unrealistic benchmark of complete independence. This differentiation responds to a common problem in eclectic frameworks: theories are not treated as interchangeable, but as performing distinct tasks within the same analytical architecture.

Table 1 – Theoretical traditions and analytical functions

Theoretical tradition	Analytical function in this article	Directly operationalized through
Constructivism	Explains how autonomy becomes part of state identity and legitimate foreign-policy behavior.	Narrative sovereignty; repeated official language of sovereignty, multivectorism, non-intervention, or plural belonging.

Poststructuralism	Interprets how discourse constructs boundaries between legitimate cooperation and unacceptable subordination.	Interpretive reading of official statements; not a separate ordinal score.
Latin American autonomy theory	Identifies mechanisms that widen room for maneuver without requiring isolation.	Partner diversification; multilateral strategy; selective resistance.
Decolonial/dependency approaches	Provides structural context for historically produced hierarchy and asymmetric interdependence.	Interpretive context for dependence concentration and scope conditions; not a standalone score.

Note. The framework is deliberately asymmetric: some traditions are directly operationalized, while others provide interpretive context. This avoids treating theoretical eclecticism as conceptual equivalence.

2.2. Conceptual boundaries: what negotiated autonomy adds

Negotiated autonomy is closest to, but not identical with, several established concepts. Hedging is generally a risk-management strategy under uncertainty in which states avoid exclusive alignment by combining engagement and insurance (Kuik, 2021). Multivectorism is a more institutionalized practice of maintaining relations with several external centers and is especially associated with Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states (Vanderhill et al., 2020; Yuneman, 2023). Non-alignment and its contemporary active variant emphasize refusal to accept the positions of competing great-power camps a priori (Fortin et al., 2023). Autonomy through diversification focuses on widening partners and coalitions to reduce dependence (Vigevani & Cepaluni, 2007). Strategic autonomy is the broader umbrella concept: the capacity to preserve decision-making space despite external constraints (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2026).

Negotiated autonomy differs by making persistent asymmetry, rather than uncertainty alone, the starting condition. It asks not simply whether a state avoids alignment or diversifies partners, but whether those practices measurably prevent a stronger partner from converting structural advantage into automatic political obedience. Multivectorism is one possible mechanism of negotiated autonomy, but Mexico demonstrates that negotiated autonomy can also exist where genuine multivectorism is materially impossible. Likewise, non-alignment is not required: a state may be embedded in an alliance, a trade regime, or a dense regional production system and still negotiate specific zones of autonomy. The concept therefore integrates diversification with multilateral leverage, identity narratives, infrastructural redundancy, and observable resistance.

The concept has clear scope conditions. Negotiated autonomy is more likely to succeed where at least some credible external alternatives exist; where state institutions can coordinate foreign economic and diplomatic policy; where disagreement with a dominant partner does not impose prohibitive costs across all issue areas; and where political narratives of autonomy are supported by material options. When a single partner dominates trade, security, finance, infrastructure, and technology simultaneously, diversification may remain symbolic. Conversely, diversification without a stable political rationale may produce opportunistic switching rather than durable autonomy. Negotiated autonomy is thus issue-specific and graduated, not a binary condition.

Table 2 – Negotiated autonomy in relation to adjacent concepts

Concept	Core emphasis	Difference from negotiated autonomy
Hedging	Risk management under uncertainty through simultaneous engagement and insurance.	Negotiated autonomy begins from persistent asymmetry, not uncertainty alone, and

		requires evidence of preserved political agency.
Multivectorism	Institutionalized relations with several external centers.	A possible mechanism of negotiated autonomy; not applicable in the same form when one relationship is structurally dominant, as in Mexico.
Non-alignment / active non-alignment	Avoiding automatic adherence to competing great-power camps.	Negotiated autonomy can exist inside alliances or dense integration regimes and therefore does not require non-alignment.
Autonomy through diversification	Broadening partners, coalitions, and South-South relations to increase bargaining room.	Closest precursor; negotiated autonomy adds dependence concentration, infrastructural capacity, and demonstrated selective resistance.
Strategic autonomy	Broad capacity to preserve decision-making space.	Negotiated autonomy is a middle-range specification for structurally asymmetric secondary and Global South powers.

Note. Negotiated autonomy is proposed as a middle-range concept for persistent structural asymmetry; it can incorporate multivectorism, diversification, or non-alignment as mechanisms without being reducible to any one of them.

3. Method

The article uses a structured qualitative comparison. Kazakhstan and Mexico are the primary cases; Türkiye and Brazil are secondary reference cases used as plausibility probes. The temporal focus is 2020-2026, a period encompassing the COVID-19 shock, Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, intensified United States-China competition, renewed industrial policy, and a wider turn toward supply-chain resilience. The design follows a most-different logic: Kazakhstan and Mexico differ in geography, regime structure, security environment, and economic model, yet both confront durable structural asymmetries. Similar mechanisms observed across such different settings provide stronger grounds for treating negotiated autonomy as portable beyond a single region.

The evidence base combines four types of material. First, official foreign-policy concepts and sectoral policy documents were included when they directly defined external priorities, sovereignty, multilateralism, or diversification. Core examples include Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy Concept for 2020-2030 and Mexico's Sectoral Foreign Relations Programs for 2020-2024 and 2025-2030 (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020; Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2020, 2025). Second, presidential and ministerial statements were used when they documented a concrete position involving alignment, resistance, or relations with dominant partners. Third, trade and integration data were used descriptively to establish the material concentration of dependence, including United States-Mexico trade data. Fourth, peer-reviewed scholarship was selected for direct relevance to the four cases, with priority given to 2020-2026 research while retaining older foundational works where conceptually necessary.

Document selection was purposive rather than exhaustive. Materials entered the evidence matrix when they met three criteria: direct relevance to one of the five analytical dimensions, identifiable institutional or scholarly provenance, and temporal or conceptual comparability across cases. Official documents were cross-checked against recent scholarship to avoid treating state narratives as self-validating evidence. Likewise, qualitative judgments were not inferred from a single quotation. A

classification was assigned only when at least two types of evidence converged—for example, trade concentration plus policy dependence, or official sovereignty language plus documented disagreement with a dominant partner.

The coding proceeded in two stages. In the first stage, each piece of evidence was assigned to one or more of five dimensions: (1) concentration of dependence; (2) partner diversification; (3) multilateral strategy; (4) narrative sovereignty; and (5) selective resistance capacity. In the second stage, case-level judgments were synthesized using the explicit rubric in Table 3. Because this is a single-author interpretive study, the procedure does not claim intercoder reliability. Instead, it prioritizes transparency, triangulation, and an auditable connection between qualitative labels and the evidence presented in the text.

Table 3 – Coding rubric for qualitative classifications

Dimension	Classification rule used in the comparison
Dependence concentration	Very high: one partner dominates several structural channels and substitution costs are high. Medium-high: dependence is substantial but divided across two or more major partners or external markets. Moderate: no single partner dominates across multiple domains.
Partner diversification	High: alternative partners are institutionalized across several policy/economic channels. Moderate: alternatives exist diplomatically but remain materially limited. Low: alternatives are episodic or weak.
Multilateral strategy	High: recurring institutions/coalitions are actively used to widen room for maneuver. Moderate: participation is regular but creates limited leverage. Low: multilateral participation is marginal to autonomy strategy.
Narrative sovereignty	Yes when official doctrine and leadership discourse consistently frame sovereign choice, non-intervention, multivectorism, or plural belonging as legitimate policy principles.
Selective resistance capacity	Issue-dependent when documented disagreements exist but the ability to absorb costs varies by domain. High only where repeated disagreement can be sustained across multiple high-cost issues.

Note. Labels summarize convergent evidence rather than numerical scores. No category is assigned from a single quotation or data point.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Kazakhstan: multivectorism as institutionalized autonomy

Kazakhstan provides the clearest primary case of autonomy through multivectorism. Multivector foreign policy has developed from a strategy of necessity into a durable doctrine for managing relationships with Russia, China, Western actors, and regional partners (Vanderhill et al., 2020).

Kazakhstan's 2020 Foreign Policy Concept explicitly emphasizes a pragmatic, balanced, and multivector course, while recent research continues to describe the approach as adaptive rather than abandoned under intensified geopolitical pressure (Ivanov & Petrenko, 2025; Mamedov, 2024; Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020; Tukumov, 2024).

The post-2022 environment provides an important test of selective resistance. Kazakhstan did not follow Russia in recognizing the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk entities. Research on Central Asian responses to the war documents that Kazakhstan explicitly refused recognition while simultaneously avoiding full strategic rupture with Moscow (Eom, 2022; Yuneman, 2023). This combination matters analytically. Refusal did not amount to anti-Russian alignment: Kazakhstan remained economically and institutionally connected to Russia and adopted cautious positions in multilateral voting. Yet the territorial-recognition issue shows that partnership did not translate into automatic obedience on a core sovereignty question.

This is precisely where multivectorism becomes more than rhetorical balance. Kazakhstan has strengthened engagement with China, the European Union, Türkiye, the Organization of Turkic States, and alternative transport routes while preserving working relations with Russia. Kuchеров et al. (2023) interpret post-2022 foreign-policy preferences as adjustment under pressure rather than a wholesale geopolitical turn. The pattern supports the negotiated-autonomy argument: Kazakhstan does not eliminate dependence; it tries to partition dependence across partners and issue areas so that no single relationship defines the entirety of its external policy.

Türkiye adds an identity-compatible and infrastructural vector. Connectivity cooperation, the Middle Corridor, and Turkic institutions do not replace Russia or China, but they create additional channels of trade, recognition, and regional action (İşcan, 2026a). This illustrates the difference between diversification as symbolism and diversification as usable capacity. Routes and partnerships contribute to autonomy only when they are institutionally credible enough to lower the cost of disagreement with existing partners.

4.2. Mexico: autonomy under extreme asymmetric interdependence

Mexico is a harder test because asymmetry is much more concentrated. The United States is not simply one external vector among several; it is the organizing structure of Mexican manufacturing, trade, migration, and supply chains. In 2024, over 80% of Mexican goods exports went to the United States and more than 40% of Mexican goods imports came from there (Office of the United States Trade Representative, n.d.). This degree of concentration creates what can be termed asymmetric embeddedness: Mexico may diversify diplomacy more readily than it can diversify the material foundations of production.

Recent scholarship reinforces this interpretation. Velázquez Flores (2022) identifies a combination of traditional principles and pragmatic adaptation under the López Obrador administration. Macdonald (2026) argues that Mexico's foreign policy continues to be constrained by the relationship with the United States even as recent governments revive sovereignty, non-intervention, and a more skeptical stance toward hegemonic expectations. Jima-González et al. (2024), analyzing Latin American responses to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, likewise show that Mexico's foreign-policy discourse and practices can generate differentiated positions rather than simple bloc alignment.

Official policy documents demonstrate continuity in the normative infrastructure of autonomy. The 2020-2024 Sectoral Foreign Relations Program committed Mexico to constitutional principles, multilateral diplomacy, and active participation in regional mechanisms, while the 2025-2030 program emphasizes expanding global diplomatic relations, reinforcing multilateral presence, and protecting national interests in a changing geopolitical context (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2020, 2025). In her 2024 inauguration, President Claudia Sheinbaum explicitly reaffirmed self-determination, non-intervention, and peaceful settlement of disputes as guiding principles of foreign policy (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2024). These are not merely historical references to the

Estrada Doctrine; they remain part of the state's contemporary vocabulary of legitimate external behavior.

The Russia-Ukraine war provides a concrete example of selective resistance. Mexico rejected the invasion as a principle while also declining to send weapons and refusing to adopt the sanctions policy favored by the United States and several European governments. President López Obrador stated in March 2022 that Mexico would not send arms abroad and in May 2022 reiterated that Mexico was not proposing sanctions, instead emphasizing negotiation and diplomacy (Presidencia de la República, 2022a, 2022b). This was not neutrality in the sense of indifference, nor a pro-Russian alignment. It was an issue-specific attempt to separate Mexico's diplomatic judgment from the policy instruments preferred by its dominant economic partner and its allies.

Mexico's autonomy is therefore selective and uneven. It is comparatively stronger in diplomatic recognition, multilateral initiatives, voting, and normative positioning, and weaker where market access, migration enforcement, investment, or integrated production create immediate bilateral leverage. This finding explains why strategic autonomy should not be measured simply by political distance from the United States. A deeply integrated state can preserve decision-making space in some domains while remaining structurally constrained in others.

4.3. Türkiye: assertive autonomy and its contradictions

Türkiye represents a more assertive reference model. It remains a NATO member and is deeply economically connected to Europe, yet it has cultivated relations with Russia, China, the Gulf, Africa, Central Asia, and other non-Western partners. The most relevant recent scholarship conceptualizes Turkish strategic autonomy through structural orientation, political motive, and economic infrastructure, while emphasizing contradictions between geopolitical ambition and political-economic capacity (Aydın-Düzgüt et al., 2026). This framework is especially useful for negotiated autonomy because it shows that diplomatic activism alone does not guarantee sustainable independence of action.

Türkiye's value for the comparison lies in both its possibilities and its limits. Diversified partnerships can increase bargaining capacity, but multiple relationships can also create incompatible expectations. Macroeconomic vulnerability, technology dependence, and dense European commercial ties can narrow room for maneuver even when diplomatic positioning is highly active. Türkiye therefore demonstrates that autonomy is not produced by rhetorical distance from the West; it depends on the capacity to absorb the costs of disagreement.

At the same time, Türkiye's expanding engagement in Central Asia shows how identity, public diplomacy, and connectivity can supplement material strategy. Turkic institutions and corridor initiatives create arenas in which influence is exercised through networks and practical cooperation rather than through exclusive alignment. This logic is consistent with research on connectivity governance, which treats transport and institutional coordination as sources of agency only when they produce credible alternatives (İşcan, 2026a).

4.4. Brazil: autonomy through diversification as a Global South tradition

Brazil provides the strongest conceptual bridge to the Latin American tradition of autonomy. Vigevani and Cepaluni's (2007) formulation of autonomy through diversification describes a strategy of broadening South-South relations, coalitions, and multilateral ties in order to increase bargaining space. Contemporary active non-alignment similarly argues that Latin American states should avoid accepting the positions of great-power camps automatically and instead evaluate cooperation according to their own interests (Fortin et al., 2023).

Brazil demonstrates that anti-hegemonic agency need not mean anti-Western alignment. The objective is not to sever relations with the United States or Europe, but to preserve alternative coalitions and policy options, including BRICS and South-South mechanisms. This distinction is important for both Kazakhstan and Mexico. Each depends on powerful partners; the relevant question

is whether those relationships leave credible room for alternative partnerships and autonomous judgment.

Brazil also clarifies the importance of institutionalized diversification. Diversification is more durable when it is supported by recurring coalitions, regional identities, and economic scale rather than by episodic diplomatic gestures. The Brazilian case therefore serves as a plausibility probe for the negotiated-autonomy concept: it shows how diversified institutional relations can reduce monopoly leverage without requiring a posture of geopolitical equidistance.

4.5. Comparative mechanisms of negotiated autonomy

The comparison suggests that autonomy is neither the absence of dependence nor a binary status. What varies is whether dependence is politically manageable. Kazakhstan manages asymmetry by multiplying vectors and preserving an explicit sovereignty doctrine. Mexico manages it through issue-specific diplomatic autonomy inside a highly concentrated North American economic structure. Türkiye seeks leverage through assertive diversification but encounters economic sustainability constraints. Brazil institutionalizes diversification through South-South coalitions and multilateral identity. These are different pathways to the same broader problem: preventing a structurally stronger partner from turning advantage into automatic compliance.

Selective resistance is the most demanding indicator because it moves the analysis beyond rhetoric. Kazakhstan's refusal to recognize Donetsk and Luhansk despite close ties with Russia demonstrates that multivectorism can produce a concrete boundary of acceptable alignment (Eom, 2022; Yuneman, 2023). Mexico's refusal to join arms transfers or sanctions against Russia, while maintaining a public rejection of invasion and commitment to diplomacy, demonstrates a different form of bounded disagreement under much deeper economic dependence on the United States (Jima-González et al., 2024; Presidencia de la República, 2022a, 2022b). These examples do not prove comprehensive autonomy; they show issue-specific capacity to resist expected policy convergence.

This evidence also clarifies why qualitative classifications must be interpreted conservatively. A label such as 'high diversification' does not mean independence; it means that alternative relationships are institutionally developed enough to create non-trivial options. 'Very high dependence concentration' does not mean that no autonomous action is possible; it means that the material cost of disagreement is likely to be especially high. The classifications in Table 4 therefore summarize mechanisms documented in the text rather than substituting for evidence.

Table 4 – Analytical indicators of strategic autonomy in the primary cases

Dimension	Kazakhstan	Mexico	Evidence summarized in the text
Dependence concentration	Medium-high; split among Russia/China plus external markets and routes.	Very high; centered on the United States across trade and production.	Kazakhstan: Republic of Kazakhstan (2020), Eom (2022), Kuchеров et al. (2023). Mexico: USTR (n.d.), Macdonald (2026).
Partner diversification	High and explicit.	Moderate; stronger diplomatically than materially.	Kazakhstan: Vanderhill et al. (2020), Ivanov & Petrenko (2025), Işcan (2026a). Mexico: SRE (2020,

			2025), Velázquez Flores (2022).
Multilateral strategy	High: UN, SCO, OTS and other regional formats.	High diplomatically: UN, CELAC and broader regional/multilateral engagement.	Republic of Kazakhstan (2020); SRE (2020, 2025).
Narrative sovereignty	Yes: multivectorism and sovereign statehood.	Yes: sovereignty, non-intervention and peaceful settlement.	Republic of Kazakhstan (2020); SRE (2024, 2025).
Selective resistance capacity	Issue-dependent; visible on territorial recognition after 2022.	Issue-dependent; visible in refusal to send arms or adopt sanctions in 2022.	Eom (2022), Yuneman (2023); Jima-González et al. (2024), Presidencia de la República (2022a, 2022b).

Note. Classifications follow the rubric in Table 3 and are supported by the evidence and sources discussed in the corresponding case sections. USTR = Office of the United States Trade Representative; SRE = Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores.

4.6. Diplomatic autonomy and infrastructural autonomy

The distinction between diplomatic and infrastructural autonomy makes the concept more systematic. Diplomatic autonomy refers to the freedom to articulate positions, vote, recognize governments or territorial claims, join coalitions, and maintain relations with competing powers. It is visible primarily in decisions and official positions. Infrastructural autonomy refers to the material capacity to sustain those choices through diversified trade, finance, transport, energy, technology, and supply-chain access. It is visible in the existence of credible alternatives that reduce the cost of political disagreement.

The two dimensions can diverge. Mexico can exercise diplomatic autonomy on selected political questions while its industrial geography remains closely tied to North American policy. Kazakhstan can articulate sovereignty and diversify partnerships while still depending on inherited transport and security infrastructures. Türkiye can maintain a wide diplomatic portfolio but face financial and technological constraints. Brazil's scale provides comparatively greater material room, but does not eliminate exposure to global finance, commodities, or technology. Strategic autonomy is therefore most resilient when diplomatic and infrastructural autonomy reinforce each other.

Connectivity is central to infrastructural autonomy because routes redistribute dependence. The Trans-Caspian and Middle Corridor projects matter for Kazakhstan not because they terminate relations with Russia or China, but because they create additional pathways. The same logic applies to Mexico: diplomatic diversification has limited structural effect if alternative trade, finance, and technology relationships remain too small to change bargaining conditions. Connectivity governance is therefore not a separate synonym for autonomy; it is one mechanism through which infrastructural alternatives can become politically usable (İşcan, 2026a, 2026c).

Table 5 – Two dimensions of negotiated autonomy

Dimension	Observable indicators	Main failure mode
Diplomatic autonomy	Independent voting or recognition; coalition choice; maintenance of relations with rival powers; issue-specific disagreement.	Rhetorical autonomy without ability to sustain costs.

Infrastructural autonomy	Alternative markets, routes, finance, energy, technology, suppliers, and transport/logistics capacity.	Material concentration that makes political disagreement prohibitively costly.
Resilient negotiated autonomy	Diplomatic choice supported by credible material alternatives and institutions.	Erosion when external alternatives are symbolic, domestic coordination is weak, or dependence becomes cross-domain and monopolistic.

Note. The distinction is analytical rather than a claim that either dimension is fully independent of the other. Resilient autonomy requires interaction between political choice and material alternatives.

4.7. Scope conditions and limits

Negotiated autonomy has limits. First, diversification becomes politically weak when alternative partners are only symbolic or economically marginal. Second, a dominant partner can retain decisive leverage when dependence is concentrated across several domains at once, especially trade, finance, security, migration, and technology. Third, domestic institutional fragmentation can prevent states from converting external options into coherent policy. Fourth, autonomy can be episodic: a state may resist on recognition or voting while aligning on security or economic regulation. The concept should therefore be applied to issue areas and mechanisms rather than used as a permanent label for entire states.

These scope conditions identify the point at which diversification ceases to generate meaningful agency. Where exit or substitution costs are prohibitively high and where no credible multilateral or material alternative exists, sovereignty discourse may remain primarily symbolic. Mexico approaches this limit in some North American production and migration domains. Kazakhstan approaches it where transport or security dependence remains concentrated. In contrast, issue areas with multiple institutional venues and lower substitution costs create more room for negotiated autonomy. This graduated interpretation avoids romanticizing Global South agency while also refusing to reduce secondary states to passive objects of great-power competition.

5. Conclusion

Kazakhstan and Mexico demonstrate that strategic autonomy is most analytically meaningful where dependence cannot be wished away. Kazakhstan's multivectorism and Mexico's selective sovereignty are different responses to the same structural problem: how to preserve political agency when prosperity, security, or production are deeply entangled with stronger powers. Türkiye and Brazil broaden the comparison by showing, respectively, the ambitions and political-economic vulnerabilities of assertive autonomy and the longer Latin American tradition of autonomy through diversification.

The article's principal theoretical contribution is negotiated autonomy. The concept does not compete with multivectorism, hedging, non-alignment, or autonomy through diversification by simply renaming them. Instead, it specifies the condition they only partially capture: persistent asymmetric interdependence. Negotiated autonomy asks whether diversification, multilateralism, sovereignty narratives, infrastructural alternatives, and selective resistance together prevent structural advantage from becoming automatic political obedience. It is therefore a middle-range concept designed for issue-specific comparison across secondary and Global South powers.

The empirical comparison also shows why diplomatic and infrastructural autonomy must be separated. Kazakhstan and Mexico can both preserve meaningful diplomatic agency while remaining materially constrained in different ways. Türkiye demonstrates that assertive diplomacy can outrun economic resilience, whereas Brazil shows that long-term diversification benefits from institutionalized coalitions and economic scale. The most sustainable autonomy is consequently not

the loudest foreign-policy rhetoric but the creation of redundant routes, partners, institutions, and capabilities that make disagreement politically affordable.

A Global South perspective changes the normative question. The issue is not whether Kazakhstan, Mexico, Türkiye, or Brazil should choose one geopolitical camp. It is whether an increasingly fragmented order can accommodate states that insist on belonging to several networks at once. Their autonomy lies not in escaping interdependence, but in preserving the capacity to negotiate its terms.

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Author contributions

Sole author: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, analysis, writing, revision, source verification, and final approval.

Data availability

The study uses publicly available official documents, public trade information, and published academic sources cited in the reference list. No restricted dataset was created.

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