

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF NATION BRANDING: KAZAKHSTAN'S EMERGING DIGITAL SOFT POWER STRATEGY

LEILA DELOVAROVA

Assoc.Prof. (Dr.), Faculty of International Relations, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University Almaty, Kazakhstan

DENIZ KAPROL YILMAZ

MA in International Relations, Faculty of International Relations Al-Farabi Kazakh National University
Almaty, Kazakhstan

Abstract. *The growing role of artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming global economic competition, governance models, and the distribution of power in the international system. While existing research in International Relations mainly examines AI through the lens of technological rivalry between major powers, considerably less attention has been paid to the ways emerging and middle powers incorporate AI into their international positioning strategies. This article explores how artificial intelligence can function not only as a technological resource but also as an instrument of nation branding and symbolic status projection. Methodologically, the research relies on qualitative discourse analysis of official policy documents and public narratives produced between 2017 and 2025. The empirical material includes the state program "Digital Kazakhstan," the national Concept for the Development of Artificial Intelligence, presidential addresses, and institutional communications from innovation platforms such as Astana Hub. These documents are examined to identify recurring narratives linking artificial intelligence with modernization, competitiveness, sovereignty, and regional leadership. The findings show that AI in Kazakhstan performs a dual function. On the one hand, it represents a practical tool of economic modernization and governance reform. On the other hand, it operates as symbolic capital used to signal technological competence and international relevance. The article argues that Kazakhstan strategically mobilizes AI discourse to reinforce its image as a modern and innovative state within the evolving global technological order. The study contributes to debates on technological statecraft and nation branding by demonstrating how emerging middle powers can use digital modernization policies to pursue international recognition and status.*

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Nation Branding; Soft Power; Digital Diplomacy; Kazakhstan; Middle Powers; Technological Statecraft; International Status

1. Introduction

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping global power structures, economic competition, and governance models. In International Relations (IR), AI is increasingly treated as



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a strategic resource, comparable to military or industrial capacity. Existing scholarship has largely examined AI through the lens of great-power rivalry, technological statecraft, and military innovation, emphasizing systemic competition among major powers.

Yet the global diffusion of AI governance extends beyond great-power politics. Emerging and middle powers are also integrating AI into national development strategies, where technological modernization serves not only economic objectives but also reputational and status-related ones. As global hierarchies increasingly reflect technological capability, AI functions as a marker of modernity and competence.

This article examines how AI is incorporated into nation branding and status-seeking strategies in emerging middle powers, focusing on Kazakhstan. Since 2017, Kazakhstan has embedded digital transformation and AI development within presidential modernization agendas, formal policy programs, institutional reforms, and innovation ecosystems. Under President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, AI has been framed as a strategic imperative linked to competitiveness, sovereignty, and regulatory modernization, accompanied by institutional consolidation and the development of flagship innovation zones.

The article asks: How does the integration of artificial intelligence into state policy and communication reshape nation branding practices in emerging middle powers?

It argues that Kazakhstan instrumentalizes AI discourse and governance architecture not solely for economic reform, but as part of a broader strategy of symbolic repositioning within international hierarchies. By conceptualizing AI as symbolic capital embedded in middle power status politics, the study contributes to debates on technological statecraft, soft power, and contemporary transformations in status competition.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews existing scholarship and identifies the theoretical gap. The subsequent sections outline the theoretical framework and methodology before analyzing Kazakhstan's AI positioning and discussing its implications for International Relations theory.

2. Literature Review

Artificial intelligence has increasingly become an important subject within International Relations scholarship, although much of the existing literature examines the topic through the lens of great-power competition (Eriksson & Giacomello, 2022). A substantial body of research focuses on the strategic implications of AI for military innovation, cybersecurity competition, and geopolitical rivalry, particularly between the United States and China (Horowitz, 2018; Lindsay, 2020; Segal, 2018). In this perspective, artificial intelligence is primarily conceptualized as a strategic technological capability capable of reshaping global balances of power and influencing the future distribution of international authority.

Beyond the military and geopolitical dimensions, a growing strand of literature examines AI in the broader context of technological statecraft and digital governance. Scholars working in this field analyze how states deploy digital technologies and technological infrastructures as instruments of influence in international politics (Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Gilboa, 2008). Digital diplomacy, data governance, and technological regulation increasingly form part of states' foreign policy toolkits. However, this literature generally focuses on the operational and institutional aspects of technological policy, rather than on its symbolic or reputational dimensions in international politics.

Another relevant body of scholarship comes from soft power theory and nation branding studies. Nye (2004, 2011) conceptualizes soft power as the ability of states to influence others through attraction and legitimacy rather than coercion. Nation branding scholars such as Anholt (2007) and Van Ham (2001) emphasize that states actively construct international reputations through coordinated communication strategies, cultural projection, and policy signaling. More recent research suggests that reputation and legitimacy are increasingly linked not only to cultural or political values but also to technological capacity and innovation performance.

Closely related to these debates, status-seeking theory provides additional insight into how states pursue international recognition. Studies by Larson and Shevchenko (2010), Paul and Wohlforth (2014), and Renshon (2017) demonstrate that international hierarchy is shaped not only by material power but also by symbolic acts, identity narratives, and performance in domains associated with modernity and competence. For middle powers and emerging states, status enhancement often relies on demonstrating alignment

with dominant international norms and technological trends rather than projecting coercive capabilities.

Despite these theoretical advances, the intersection between artificial intelligence policy and nation branding strategies remains relatively underexplored, particularly in the context of emerging and middle powers. Existing studies tend to privilege the technological strategies of major powers, leaving limited attention to how smaller or structurally constrained states mobilize technological modernization as part of their international image construction.

Recent research on Central Asia and Kazakhstan provides important empirical insights that help address this gap. Since the late 2010s, Kazakhstan has pursued an ambitious digital transformation agenda aimed at modernizing its economy and strengthening its international competitiveness. The state program "Digital Kazakhstan," launched in 2017, marked a significant turning point in the country's technological development strategy, emphasizing digital governance, innovation ecosystems, and the expansion of high-tech sectors. Scholars examining Kazakhstan's modernization policies have highlighted the role of digitalization in the country's broader development model and its aspiration to position itself as a regional technological hub (Satpayev, 2020; Laruelle, 2021).

In parallel, studies on Kazakhstan's foreign policy have emphasized the country's long-standing strategy of international positioning through multi-vector diplomacy and active participation in global governance initiatives (Kassenova, 2009; Clarke, 2015). Within this context, technological modernization and digital innovation increasingly contribute to Kazakhstan's external image as a modern and forward-looking state. Initiatives such as the development of Astana Hub, the expansion of innovation infrastructure, and the recent adoption of national AI development strategies illustrate the growing importance of technological narratives in the country's international communication.

However, the existing literature rarely analyzes these developments through the combined lenses of artificial intelligence policy, nation branding, and status-seeking dynamics. While Kazakhstan's digital modernization has been widely discussed in economic and policy studies, its role in shaping international reputation and symbolic positioning remains insufficiently explored. This article addresses that gap by examining how AI-related policies and narratives are integrated into Kazakhstan's broader strategy of international image

construction and status signaling within the evolving global technological order.

Despite these growing strands of research, important gaps remain in the literature. First, existing studies tend to analyze artificial intelligence primarily as a material or strategic resource, with limited attention to its symbolic and reputational functions in international politics. Second, the intersection between technological policy, nation branding, and status-seeking dynamics remains insufficiently integrated, as these fields are often studied in isolation. Third, the role of emerging and middle powers in shaping technological narratives is still underexplored, with a strong bias toward great-power competition in current scholarship. As a result, there is a need for analytical frameworks that account for the ways in which technological development can operate simultaneously as a policy instrument and as a mechanism of symbolic international positioning. This article responds to this gap by examining how artificial intelligence is mobilized within Kazakhstan's broader strategy of nation branding and status signaling.

3. Theoretical Framework

This article conceptualizes artificial intelligence as symbolic capital within middle power status politics. It draws on three complementary theoretical strands: soft power, nation branding, and status-seeking theory.

First, soft power theory highlights attraction and legitimacy as sources of influence distinct from coercion (Nye, 2004). In contemporary international politics, technological capability increasingly contributes to perceived modernity, competence, and future-readiness. AI, therefore, can function not only as material capacity but as a source of reputational attraction.

Second, nation branding scholarship emphasizes the strategic construction of state identity in global arenas (Anholt, 2007; Van Ham, 2001). Branding extends beyond communication: it involves aligning domestic policy with external narratives to produce a coherent and credible international image. Technological modernization provides a particularly powerful identity marker because it signals integration into global innovation systems.

Third, middle power and status-seeking theory underlines that recognition and hierarchy are shaped not only by material capabilities but also by symbolic acts and performance (Larson &

Shevchenko, 2010; Paul & Wohlforth, 2014). For structurally constrained states, status enhancement often relies on signaling competence and alignment with emerging global norms rather than projecting coercive power.

Bringing these strands together, the article treats AI policy as a performative mechanism of international repositioning. AI becomes both capability and signal: it contributes materially to modernization while simultaneously communicating aspirations of competitiveness, sovereignty, and regional leadership. This framework enables the analysis of AI not merely as industrial policy, but as an instrument of symbolic politics embedded in middle power strategies.

This conceptualization also implies that artificial intelligence should be understood as a hybrid resource that operates across material and symbolic dimensions of power. While its technical capabilities contribute to economic and administrative performance, its political significance extends to the realm of perception, recognition, and legitimacy. In this sense, AI functions as a form of “performative capability,” through which states do not merely develop technological capacity but actively stage and communicate their alignment with emerging global norms of modernity and innovation. This perspective allows for a more integrated understanding of technological statecraft, where policy implementation and narrative construction are mutually reinforcing processes that shape both domestic transformation and international positioning.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative single-case research design to examine how artificial intelligence is incorporated into Kazakhstan’s nation branding and status-seeking strategy. Kazakhstan was selected as a strategically relevant case of an emerging middle power pursuing international repositioning without relying on large-scale military projection. Its combination of resource-based economic structure, multi-vector foreign policy, and recent emphasis on digital modernization makes it particularly suitable for analyzing the symbolic politics of technological development.

The empirical analysis relies on qualitative discourse analysis of official policy documents and public diplomacy narratives issued between 2017 and 2025. The corpus includes the State Program “Digital Kazakhstan” (2017), the Concept for the Development of Artificial Intelligence (2024–2029), presidential State of the Nation addresses, official communications from Akorda, institutional

materials from Astana Hub, and public statements concerning AI governance and regulatory reform. These sources were selected because they constitute authoritative articulations of state identity and strategic intent.

The analysis identifies recurring themes, narrative patterns, and framing strategies linking AI to modernization, competitiveness, sovereignty, and regional leadership. Rather than measuring technological capacity quantitatively, the study focuses on how AI is discursively constructed as symbolic capital and embedded within broader narratives of international positioning. This interpretive approach allows the identification of AI as policy substance and as performative identity resource within Kazakhstan's foreign policy discourse. This method is particularly appropriate for examining status-seeking behavior, as status is fundamentally mediated through recognition, narrative construction, and symbolic performance.

At the same time, this approach presents certain limitations. The reliance on official documents and institutional narratives may privilege state-led representations of technological development, potentially overlooking discrepancies between discourse and implementation. Moreover, the focus on a single case limits the generalizability of the findings. However, the objective of this study is not to produce broadly generalizable conclusions, but rather to develop a theoretically informed interpretation of how artificial intelligence can function as a resource of symbolic positioning in the context of an emerging middle power.

5. Results

The empirical analysis identifies a set of interconnected mechanisms through which artificial intelligence is incorporated into Kazakhstan's international positioning and nation branding strategy. Rather than operating as isolated policy domains, these mechanisms form a coherent and multi-layered framework that links domestic technological development with external image construction and status signaling. Specifically, the analysis highlights how AI is articulated across several key dimensions: high-level political discourse, institutional governance structures, spatial innovation initiatives, the strategic use of quantified performance indicators, and its framing as a component of sovereignty and status. Together, these dimensions illustrate how artificial intelligence functions simultaneously as a tool of modernization and as a performative

resource embedded in Kazakhstan's broader strategy of symbolic international repositioning.

5.1 AI as Presidential Modernization Imperative

A central finding of the analysis is the strong personalization of artificial intelligence-driven modernization at the highest political level in Kazakhstan. In official speeches, State of the Nation addresses, and high-level policy discussions, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev repeatedly frames artificial intelligence as a strategic priority linked to economic competitiveness, administrative efficiency, and national resilience (Tokayev, 2025). Rather than being presented as a narrowly technical policy domain, AI is integrated into broader narratives of modernization, digital sovereignty, and long-term economic transformation.

This framing reflects a broader pattern in Kazakhstan's political communication, where presidential leadership has traditionally played a central role in articulating major reform agendas. From economic modernization to digital transformation, national development initiatives are often introduced and legitimized through presidential discourse. The incorporation of artificial intelligence into this modernization narrative therefore situates technological development within a familiar political framework that emphasizes state-led progress and strategic planning.

At the same time, presidential discourse performs an important external signaling function. By consistently highlighting AI as a national priority, Kazakhstan's leadership communicates its intention to align the country with global technological transformations. Artificial intelligence thus becomes part of a broader narrative of national progress and future-oriented governance.

From the perspective of nation branding, this high-level political framing contributes to shaping Kazakhstan's international image as a technologically ambitious and reform-oriented state. The repeated association between AI, modernization, and global competitiveness reinforces the perception that technological capability is becoming a central element of the country's development strategy and international positioning.

5.2 Institutional Consolidation and Governance Architecture

The analysis further shows that Kazakhstan's AI discourse is increasingly embedded within a developing governance architecture. While early references to artificial intelligence appeared primarily within broader modernization narratives, more recent policy initiatives reflect a gradual institutionalization of digital and AI governance. The State Program "Digital Kazakhstan," launched in 2017, established the foundations for large-scale digital transformation, promoting technological innovation, digital infrastructure, and the expansion of e-government services. Building on this framework, more recent initiatives, including the national Concept for the Development of Artificial Intelligence (2024–2029), indicate a growing effort to structure and coordinate AI policy at the national level.

This evolution illustrates a shift from rhetorical modernization narratives toward more formalized policy structures. The strengthening of ministerial coordination and the growing role of institutions responsible for digital development demonstrate that artificial intelligence is increasingly treated as a domain of public policy requiring regulatory oversight, strategic planning, and administrative capacity. In this sense, AI governance is gradually becoming integrated into the broader institutional architecture of Kazakhstan's digital transformation.

Institutional consolidation also plays an important role in reinforcing the credibility of Kazakhstan's technological ambitions. In many cases, technology-driven nation branding strategies risk being perceived as aspirational narratives without concrete policy foundations. The emergence of formal governance structures and long-term policy frameworks helps reduce this credibility gap.

From an international perspective, these institutional developments signal Kazakhstan's intention to position itself as a structured and reliable actor within the emerging global landscape of digital governance and technological innovation.

5.3 Spatial Branding: Alatau and the Materialization of Innovation Identity

A third pattern concerns the spatialization of digital identity through flagship innovation zones. Projects such as Alatau (innovation and technology cluster development initiatives) function as material

embodiments of the AI modernization narrative. Alatau is being developed as a large-scale innovation and technology cluster designed to attract high-tech investment, concentrate digital industries, and position Kazakhstan as a regional hub for advanced technological development (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023).

These initiatives serve a dual function. Domestically, they concentrate infrastructure, talent, and investment. Internationally, they operate as visible symbols of technological ambition. The spatial dimension of innovation policy reinforces branding claims by providing tangible sites that anchor the narrative of modernization. AI identity is thus territorialized, transforming abstract discourse into spatially recognizable projects.

Importantly, this spatial strategy reflects a broader global pattern in which states use innovation clusters as instruments of international positioning (Mazzucato, 2013). Comparable initiatives such as Silicon Valley in the United States, Dubai Internet City in the United Arab Emirates, or Skolkovo in Russia illustrate how technological spaces can function as internationally recognizable symbols of innovation capacity. By developing Alatau, Kazakhstan aligns itself with this global model of spatial branding, seeking not only to develop technological capabilities but also to signal its inclusion within the geography of global innovation.

Furthermore, the materialization of innovation identity through spatial projects enhances the credibility of national narratives. While discourse alone may be perceived as aspirational, physical infrastructures provide visible evidence of commitment to technological development. In this sense, Alatau operates both as an economic project and as a performative space where Kazakhstan's technological identity is enacted and displayed to international audiences.

Beyond their economic and infrastructural functions, innovation clusters such as Alatau can also be interpreted as instruments of strategic narrative projection. In this sense, spatial branding operates not only through physical development but through the construction of internationally recognizable symbols of modernity and technological ambition. The visibility of such projects contributes to shaping external perceptions by offering concrete reference points through which foreign investors, policymakers, and international partners can interpret Kazakhstan's development trajectory. This dynamic reflects a broader shift in nation branding practices, where

states increasingly rely on materialized infrastructures to support and legitimize their strategic narratives. Rather than remaining purely discursive, technological identity becomes embedded in space, thereby reinforcing its credibility and durability. As a result, spatial innovation projects function as interfaces between domestic policy implementation and international image construction, bridging the gap between symbolic ambition and observable transformation.

5.4 Quantified Innovation as Reputational Asset

Astana Hub remains a central reputational anchor within this strategy. Official communications emphasize the number of participating firms, foreign involvement, export growth, and cumulative revenue (Astana Hub, 2024). The systematic quantification of ecosystem development translates symbolic aspiration into internationally legible metrics.

By foregrounding measurable outputs, Kazakhstan converts innovation rhetoric into performance indicators that external audiences can interpret as evidence of modernization. Astana Hub continues to report growth in ecosystem participation and export activity. These metrics reduce informational uncertainty and strengthen the credibility of AI-driven nation branding.

Beyond their descriptive function, these quantitative indicators play an important communicative role. In the context of global competition for investment and technological partnerships, numerical data serves as a universal language that facilitates comparison across countries. Indicators such as the number of startups, levels of foreign participation, or export volumes allow Kazakhstan to position itself within global rankings and benchmarking systems that shape perceptions of innovation performance.

This process can be understood as a form of “quantified reputation-building,” in which states use statistical indicators to reinforce narratives of progress and competitiveness. By aligning its communication strategy with globally recognized metrics, Kazakhstan enhances the legibility of its technological achievements for international audiences, including investors, policymakers, and international organizations.

At the same time, the reliance on quantitative indicators also reflects the increasing importance of performance-based legitimacy in

contemporary international politics. Technological credibility is not only asserted through discourse, but also demonstrated through measurable outputs. In this sense, quantified innovation becomes a key interface between domestic policy achievements and international recognition.

This emphasis on quantification also reflects a deeper transformation in how states communicate credibility in the international system. In an environment characterized by information asymmetry and competition for attention, numerical indicators serve as tools for simplifying complex realities and enhancing international legibility. By translating technological development into measurable outputs, states are able to position themselves within global hierarchies that increasingly rely on rankings, indexes, and comparative performance metrics. This process not only facilitates external evaluation but also contributes to shaping expectations regarding future growth and technological potential. In this sense, quantified innovation functions as a signaling mechanism, allowing Kazakhstan to communicate reliability, progress, and strategic direction in a format that is readily understood across different institutional and cultural contexts. As such, metrics do not merely describe performance; they actively shape international reputation and perceived competitiveness.

5.5 AI as Sovereignty and Status Signal

Finally, the discourse consistently links AI to sovereignty and international standing. AI is framed as essential not only for economic growth, but for maintaining autonomy in an increasingly competitive technological order. This linkage connects digital capability with status recognition.

In official narratives, artificial intelligence is frequently associated with the concept of digital sovereignty, understood as the capacity of the state to control critical technological infrastructures, data flows, and regulatory frameworks. This reflects a broader global concern regarding technological dependence and the strategic control of global economic and technological networks (Farrell & Newman, 2019). By emphasizing AI development, Kazakhstan signals its intention to reduce vulnerability to external technological influence while strengthening its capacity for autonomous policy-making.

At the same time, sovereignty in this context does not imply isolation. Rather, Kazakhstan's approach reflects a balancing strategy between autonomy and integration into global technological

networks. Participation in international innovation ecosystems, attraction of foreign investment, and alignment with global technological standards coexist with efforts to develop domestic capabilities. This dual positioning allows Kazakhstan to present itself as both an open and a sovereign actor within the global digital order.

From a status-seeking perspective, the association between AI and sovereignty enhances the symbolic value of technological development. AI becomes not only a tool of modernization but also a marker of state capacity and strategic relevance. Through presidential emphasis, institutional consolidation, spatial innovation projects, and performance metrics, AI becomes a performative signal of upward mobility within international hierarchies. The analysis indicates that Kazakhstan's AI strategy operates simultaneously as policy reform and symbolic repositioning mechanism.

This articulation of artificial intelligence as a component of sovereignty also reflects the growing politicization of technological infrastructures in international relations. As digital systems become central to economic activity, governance, and security, control over these systems acquires strategic importance. In this context, AI is not only associated with innovation and competitiveness, but also with resilience and long-term autonomy. For Kazakhstan, integrating AI into narratives of sovereignty allows the state to position itself within broader global debates on technological governance while simultaneously reinforcing its claims to independent strategic agency. This further illustrates how technological development operates at the intersection of domestic policy priorities and international positioning strategies.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to ongoing debates in International Relations regarding the relationship between technological development, state identity, and international positioning. While much of the existing literature on artificial intelligence focuses on strategic competition between major powers, the case of Kazakhstan illustrates how emerging and middle powers can mobilize technological narratives as part of broader strategies of international visibility and reputation-building.

Importantly, the findings suggest that these different dimensions do not operate independently, but rather form a coherent and mutually reinforcing system. Presidential discourse, institutional structures,

spatial projects, and quantified indicators interact to produce a consistent narrative of technological modernization and international relevance. This interdependence highlights the importance of analyzing artificial intelligence not as a single policy domain, but as part of a broader strategic configuration linking domestic transformation with external positioning.

The analysis suggests that artificial intelligence in Kazakhstan operates simultaneously at two interconnected levels. On the one hand, it represents a policy instrument associated with economic modernization, digital governance, and administrative reform. On the other hand, AI also functions as a symbolic resource that helps communicate an image of technological competence and forward-looking governance to international audiences. This duality highlights an important tension between material capability and narrative construction, suggesting that technological policy cannot be fully understood without considering its communicative and performative dimensions.

This observation resonates with scholarship on nation branding and soft power, which emphasizes the importance of reputation, credibility, and symbolic signaling in contemporary international politics (Nye, 2011; Anholt, 2007). However, the findings of this study extend these approaches by demonstrating that technological capacity itself is increasingly becoming a core component of national reputation. In a global environment characterized by rapid technological change, alignment with emerging technological paradigms may serve as a key indicator of modernity and international relevance.

For middle powers and emerging states, this dynamic is particularly significant. Lacking the material capabilities of major technological powers, such states may instead emphasize participation in global technological trends as a way of strengthening their international profile. In this regard, Kazakhstan's strategy shares similarities with other innovation-oriented states such as the United Arab Emirates, Singapore, or Estonia, which also leverage digital transformation and technological governance as instruments of international positioning. This suggests that AI-driven nation branding may represent a broader pattern rather than an isolated case.

At the same time, the findings also highlight important limitations and potential tensions within this model. First, there may be a gap between narrative projection and actual technological capacity. While discourse emphasizes ambition and modernization, the extent

to which these narratives correspond to globally competitive AI capabilities remains uneven. Second, the reliance on external investment, foreign expertise, and global technological ecosystems raises questions about the sustainability of technological sovereignty. Third, there is a risk of “over-symbolization,” where technological narratives are used primarily for reputational purposes without corresponding structural transformation.

These limitations underline the importance of institutional credibility. Technological narratives alone are unlikely to produce durable reputational effects if they are not supported by visible policy frameworks and governance structures. The gradual institutionalization of AI governance in Kazakhstan—through national strategies, digital programs, and administrative coordination—plays a key role in reinforcing the credibility of the country's modernization discourse.

An additional implication of this analysis concerns the evolving nature of power and hierarchy in the international system. As technological development becomes increasingly central to economic growth and governance capacity, the criteria through which states are evaluated are also shifting. Traditional indicators of power, such as military capability or resource endowment, are progressively complemented—though not replaced—by measures of technological sophistication and innovation capacity. In this context, artificial intelligence emerges as a particularly salient domain through which states can demonstrate their ability to adapt to and shape the future of the global order. For emerging and middle powers, this creates both opportunities and constraints. On the one hand, technological domains offer new avenues for status enhancement that do not require large-scale material capabilities. On the other hand, they introduce new forms of competition and dependency, as access to knowledge, infrastructure, and global networks remains unevenly distributed. This dual dynamic highlights the increasingly hybrid nature of power, where material, institutional, and symbolic dimensions are deeply intertwined.

More broadly, this case study suggests that the relationship between technology and international status deserves greater attention within International Relations scholarship. As technological capacity becomes an increasingly visible marker of modernity and progress, emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence may play a growing role in shaping how states construct and project their international identities. Future research should further explore the

extent to which AI-driven nation branding produces tangible shifts in international recognition, as well as the conditions under which symbolic technological capital translates into sustained geopolitical influence.

7. Conclusion

This article examined how artificial intelligence is integrated into Kazakhstan's broader strategy of international positioning and nation branding. While much of the existing literature focuses on the role of AI in great-power technological competition, the case of Kazakhstan demonstrates that emerging and middle powers can also strategically mobilize technological development as a resource for international visibility, credibility, and status enhancement.

The analysis has shown that artificial intelligence in Kazakhstan performs a dual function. At the domestic level, AI is framed as a key instrument of economic modernization, digital transformation, and administrative efficiency. At the international level, it operates as a symbolic resource that contributes to the construction of Kazakhstan's image as a technologically ambitious and forward-looking state. Through presidential discourse, institutional consolidation, spatial innovation projects, and the use of quantified performance indicators, AI becomes embedded in a broader strategy of symbolic repositioning within the global technological order. This strategy is not based on a single policy dimension, but on the articulation of multiple interconnected mechanisms that together produce a coherent narrative of modernization and international competitiveness.

Beyond the empirical findings, this study highlights a broader transformation in the nature of international competition and status construction. As technological development becomes increasingly central to economic performance and governance capacity, it also emerges as a key marker of modernity and international relevance. In this context, artificial intelligence functions not only as a tool of policy but as a form of symbolic capital through which states signal competence, adaptability, and alignment with future-oriented global norms. For middle powers, this creates new pathways to status enhancement that do not rely primarily on traditional forms of material power, but rather on the ability to position themselves within emerging technological paradigms.

At the same time, the findings underscore the importance of credibility and structural consistency. The effectiveness of AI-driven

nation branding depends on the extent to which symbolic narratives are supported by tangible institutional development, measurable outputs, and sustained policy implementation. Without this alignment, there is a risk that technological discourse remains primarily performative, potentially limiting its impact on international recognition and long-term positioning. This highlights a central tension identified throughout the analysis: artificial intelligence operates simultaneously as a material resource and as a narrative instrument, and its effectiveness depends on the interaction between these two dimensions.

More broadly, this article contributes to International Relations scholarship by demonstrating that technological policy should be understood not only in terms of capability and competition, but also in terms of identity construction and symbolic politics. By conceptualizing artificial intelligence as a form of symbolic capital embedded in middle power status strategies, the study offers a framework for analyzing how emerging technologies reshape the ways in which states seek recognition within the international system.

Future research could extend this analysis in several directions. Comparative studies examining other middle powers—such as the United Arab Emirates, Singapore, or Estonia—would help determine whether AI-driven nation branding represents a broader structural trend or remains context-specific. In addition, further research could investigate the extent to which technological narratives translate into measurable changes in international status, influence, and attractiveness. Such work would contribute to a deeper understanding of how technological transformation intersects with global hierarchy, legitimacy, and the evolving forms of power in the digital age.

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