



Feature Article
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Kazakhstan-Russia Relations After 2022: Sources of Contention, Points of Pressure

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The dramatic events of 2022 - the January unrest in Kazakhstan and Russia's war against Ukraine - upended the status quo in Kazakhstan-Russia relations. Astana must now address both long-standing vulnerabilities—security, political, and economic—and new pressures in areas such as inter-elite relations (as they shape up in the process of "denazarbayevization"), nuclear energy, and history writing. The Tokayev government seeks to accommodate Russia as much as possible while advancing Kazakhstan's sovereignty, which requires constant adjustments and trade-offs.

A From 1991 to 2021, Kazakhstan-Russia relations remained remarkably stable. Unlike some other post-Soviet capi-



Kazakhstan Border Crossing. Photo credit: gov.kz

tals, Astana avoided open conflict with Moscow and did not oscillate between Russia and other major powers. Instead, Kazakh policymakers adopted a "multi-vector" approach—diversifying partnerships while deepening ties with Russia. They understood their country's

dependencies and vulnerabilities, shaped by geography and Soviet heritage. They also learned from the difficulties faced by other post-Soviet states, whose actions

sometimes provoked Moscow's punitive responses, such as supporting separatists, media attacks, or import bans.

The adopted formula had worked well until the dramatic developments in 2022. The January (“Qantar”) events in Kazakhstan and Russia’s war against Ukraine upended the status quo. The “denazarbayevization” of the political-economic system and the split, albeit with blurry lines, of the elites between the “New Kazakhstan” and “Old Kazakhstan” has the potential to create space for Russia’s interference in the country’s domestic politics. The war rekindled fears of Moscow’s “recollecting lands” impulses and made the balancing act between Russia and the West much more difficult, pushing the country toward greater diversification of its economic, political, and military ties.

The biggest and most important unknown in the observable future is Russia. Are its goals and interests in Kazakhstan and Central Asia changing? Will it modify and toughen its approach? By waging a full-fledged war against Ukraine and incorporating its territories into the Russian Federation, Putin and his government pushed the country onto a new trajectory. In the words of analyst Dmitry Trenin, the “special military operation” became a “breaking point of the foreign policy of contemporary Russia.”¹

Having broken normative constraints, Moscow has pumped up the ideological offensive. The language and tone of Russian diplomacy are more aggressive and high-pitched. The media ecosystem amplifies this trend, further pushing the boundaries of the permissible. Russian policymakers and media personalities have been turning up the heat on Kazakhstan as well, making complaints about its “unfriendly” actions and threatening it with consequences. The Kazakh government’s response has consisted of politely retorting to accusations that cannot be ignored without “losing face” and partially accommodating others.

This change is very worrying, as Kazakhstan is vulnerable to Russia’s pressure across the board. In the area of military-political security, the northern neighbor (and former metropol) could potentially pose an existential threat by violating the country’s territorial integrity and undermining its sovereignty. The two share a 4,000-kilometer border (the world’s longest continuous border), which is de facto unprotectable. Although the share of Kazakhstan’s ethnic Russian population decreased from 38 percent in 1991 to 15 percent in 2024, reducing the potential for separatism in northern regions, it is still substantial.

¹ Dmitry Trenin, “Spetsialnaya Voennaya Operatsia na Ukraine kak perelomnaya tochka vneshnei politiki sovremennoi Rossii” [Special military operation in Ukraine as a breaking point of the foreign policy of

contemporary Russia], *Russia in Global Affairs*, November 30, 2022, (<https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/perelomnaya-tochka/>)

There are major dependencies in the economic sphere. The northern neighbor is a top trading partner for Kazakhstan, and in 2024 bilateral trade reached a record \$28 billion. Russia accounts for 30.5 percent of Kazakhstan's total imports and 11.7 percent of its total exports.² The two economies are tied together by the arrangements and regulations of the Eurasian Customs Union and Eurasian Economic Union. Kazakhstan is highly vulnerable to macroeconomic shock spillovers from Russia, including currency exchange rate fluctuations and inflation spikes.³

Russia is the main transit country for Kazakhstan's strategic commodities, such as oil and metals (including uranium), as well as grain, going to global markets. Western sanctions imposed on Russia for its aggression against Ukraine made the use of the northern route problematic. In response, the Kazakh government accelerated the development of the Middle Corridor, connecting the country across the Caspian Sea to the South Caucasus and beyond to Turkey and Europe. The corridor is strategically sound, but the multiple countries along the way need to overcome many obstacles (and fast) to make it functional and competitive. In the observable future, it cannot substitute the

northern corridor for transporting Kazakh oil and uranium to Western markets.

Profound vulnerabilities have been embedded in Kazakhstan's relations with Russia since the beginning. Kazakhstan's decision makers became adept at preventing and mitigating damage. However, as already argued, since 2022, the external and domestic environments of the two countries have changed so substantially that the Tokayev government needs to further calibrate its approach and make difficult choices. The highly challenging nature of charting a course in current troubled waters can be discerned in these three areas: inter-elite relations, nuclear energy, and history writing.

"Old Kazakhstan" versus "New Kazakhstan"

A new point of pressure is Moscow's potential involvement in Kazakhstan's intra-elite struggle. Nazarbayev's personalized consolidated authoritarian regime could successfully eliminate both formal political opposition and informal forms of power contestation, complicating the prospects of external meddling. His resignation in March 2019 created hopes for the liberalization of the political system, on the one

² National Statistics Bureau of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan. (<https://stat.gov.kz/ru/industries/economy/foreign-market/publications/280982/>)

³ Woosik Yu, "Microeconomic shock spillovers from Russia to Kazakhstan," *Post-Communist Economies*,

vol. 37 no. 3, 2025, pp.223-246.

(<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14631377.2025.2461925?scroll=top&needAccess=true>)

hand, and an opening for the “under the carpet bulldog fight” among power-hungry elite groups, on the other. The two trends led to the events of January 2022, which combined popular protests and a coup attempt, unleashing violence in a number of cities. To restore order and strike down the coup, President Tokayev called on the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) for help. Putin’s decision to support him is likely to have played an important, if not crucial, role in the outcome of the events, sending the signal to local elites, including security and law enforcement bodies, that he considered Tokayev the legitimate leader of the country.

The CSTO’s successful intervention in Kazakhstan’s security and political crisis created the impression that Tokayev was indebted to Moscow. However, this perception was soon challenged when, in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, he adopted a rather independent stance, supporting Ukraine’s territorial integrity. In summer 2022, at the International Economic Forum in St. Petersburg, sitting next to Putin, Tokayev famously stated Kazakhstan’s position of non-recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics and confirmed

the country’s compliance with Western sanctions.

These statements triggered criticism from Russian politicians and opinion-makers. Deputy Chair of the State Duma committee on CIS affairs, Konstantin Zatulin, characterized Tokayev’s words as “a challenge to the Russian president and inappropriate behavior,” and former Duma deputy and head of Rospotrebnadzor (the Russian federal service in charge of sanitary-epidemiological control, known for banning products from countries that made Moscow unhappy for various reasons), Gennady Onishenko called Tokayev “ungrateful” for making “inappropriate statements” instead of “staying quiet,” despite being “saved” by Russia. Zatulin went further, recalling that Kazakhstan has regions with a predominantly Russian population and mentioning the possibility of “territorial issues” if “friendship, cooperation and partnership” with Russia falls through, as in the case of Ukraine.⁴

In the aftermath of the January events, Tokayev launched a gentle “denazarbayevization.” Nazarbayev’s privileges as the first president were curtailed, and his family members and associates lost positions of power in the state and

⁴ Alexei Chernikov, “Chem Moskva mozhet otvetit na yavnuyu neloialnost Kazahstana” [What could be Moscow’s response to Kazakhstan’s apparent unloyalty?], *Moskovskaya Gazeta*, 19 June 2022,

<https://mskgazeta.ru/politika/chem-moskva-mozhet-otvetit-na-yavnuyu-neloyalnost-kazahstana-10354.html>

quasi-state institutions. Many were prosecuted and forced to return assets acquired through corruption. Tokayev described the process as “dismantling the family-clan system”, sitting at the core of the “Old Kazakhstan.”

Pushed out from the helm of power, Nazarbayev publicly accepted his new position as “a mere pensioner”, but he might not have fully resigned to his fate. It became public that he has continued meeting with Putin, possibly seeking assurances and guarantees for himself and his family. The news of their December 2024 meeting triggered conspiracy theories about the “Old Kazakhstan” plotting revenge.⁵ Tokayev in an interview to *Ana Tili* newspaper made an unusually caustic comment, noting that it was Nazarbayev who initiated these meetings because “for him they are extremely important” and “we must not forget that, as the former Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Kazakh SSR, party leader and then president of sovereign Kazakhstan, he is morally and politically closely connected with the Kremlin.”⁶

However, close personal ties incorporating political and economic interests are not limited to

Nazarbayev and his clan. They are characteristic of Kazakh elites on both sides of the blurry divide between “Old” and “New” Kazakhstan. One example of such connectedness is political heavyweight Imangali Tasmagambetov, Nazarbayev’s long-term loyalist, who served as mayor of Almaty, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense, and Ambassador to Russia, and sat on the board of the Russian automobile company “KAMAZ” in 2021-22. Since January 2023, he has served as the General Secretary of the CSTO. Kazakhstan’s elite members with these kinds of connections and access could potentially instrumentalize Moscow’s support in the competition for power in the country, thereby allowing Moscow to use Kazakh elite politics to keep Kazakhstan in check.

Nuclear energy

Another point of pressure emerged following Kazakhstan’s decision to develop nuclear power. Over the past decades, the national company Kazatomprom has successfully developed a full nuclear cycle from uranium extraction to the production of nuclear fuel pellets, except for the enrichment stage.⁷ Now it is

⁵ Galiya Ibragimova, “Teni revansha: Zachem Nazarbayev zachastil k Putinu” [Shadows of revenge: Why does Nazarbayev keep visiting Putin?], *Carnegie Politika*, July 16, 2025. (<https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/07/kazakhstan-russia-president-struggle?lang=ru>)

⁶ Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, “Tsel ukrepit ekonomiku i suverenitet” [The Goal is to Strengthen the Economy

and Sovereignty], Interview to the “Ana Tili” Newspaper, January 3, 2025, (<https://www.akorda.kz/ru/kasym-zhomart-tokaev-cel-ukrepit-ekonomiku-i-suverenitet-20524>)

⁷ Togzhan Kassenova, *Atomic Steppe: How Kazakhstan Gave Up the Bomb*, Stanford University Press, 2022.

the world's leading uranium producer. However, the next logical step – acquiring nuclear power plants – had been postponed due to anti-nuclear sentiments widespread in Kazakhstan's society, traumatized by the tragic history of Soviet nuclear tests. As soon as Tokayev assumed the presidency in 2019, he noted the possibility of holding a national referendum on the issue. Such a referendum was held in October 2024, and with 71 percent of respondents voting in favor, it greenlighted the construction of a nuclear power plant.

As expected, the Russian national company Rosatom won the bid to build the first power plant (the short list also included Chinese CNNC, South Korean KHNP, and French EDF). The Rosatom proposal had considerable strengths, including financing on favorable terms, geographic proximity, a well-developed transport infrastructure, shared legacies, and the absence of a language barrier. It could build on a well-established partnership with Kazatomprom: they jointly develop a significant share of Kazakhstan's uranium deposits; Kazatomprom sends uranium to Russia for enrichment and then uses it to produce pellets for Russian nuclear power plants. The carrots were also accompanied by a "stick": Not selecting Rosatom would have been perceived as a serious insult in Moscow.

At the same time, the downsides of the Rosatom option were also significant. The Russian company is increasingly affected by Western sanctions, which can hinder its capacity to implement the project. Choosing Rosatom also implies tying Kazakhstan's nuclear energy sector even tighter to Russia and strengthening dependence on Russian technologies and supply chains. Public sentiment was largely opposed to this choice. One informal poll showed that Kazakhstani respondents strongly opposed Rosatom and preferred the French company (37%), the South Korean company (33%), and the Chinese company (16%).⁸

The selection process rekindled the memories of the dramatic developments around Kazatomprom fifteen years ago. In 2009, Kazatomprom's head Mukhtar Dzhakishev was arrested on corruption charges. In a video leaked to YouTube, Dzhakishev linked the arrest to his efforts to prevent Russia from gaining a controlling stake in Uranium One, a Canada-based company with operations in Kazakhstan (Toshiba and a Chinese company were to buy a 20 percent stake), and plans to produce uranium pellets for the Japanese market (Russia offered to produce pellets in Japan, cutting Kazakhstan out of the deal). In fact, shortly after the arrest, a Rosatom-owned company, ARMZ, acquired a stake in Uranium One (and it turned

⁸ Berik Matebay, "Who will build Kazakhstan's first nuclear power plant?", *Astana Times*, May 19, 2025,

([https://astanatimes.com/2025/05/who-will-build-kazakhstans-first-nuclear-power-plant.](https://astanatimes.com/2025/05/who-will-build-kazakhstans-first-nuclear-power-plant/))

out that the director of ARMZ was the son-in-law of the newly-appointed president of Kazatomprom, Vladimir Shkolnik), and Japanese partners withdrew from the deal.⁹

Dzhakishev was granted parole and released from prison in 2020, and this was seen by the public as a sign of liberalization promised by President Tokayev. In his post-release interviews, Dzhakishev recounted tense conversations he had with top Russian officials, including President Putin and Rosatom head Sergey Kirienko, and the pressure Moscow was exerting on Astana to block Kazakhstan's ambition to become a leader in the nuclear energy sector. In his words, Russia wanted to keep Kazakhstan in the position of a "banana republic."¹⁰

Despite these pressures, over the years, Kazakhstan has cultivated international partnerships, enabling technology acquisitions and expansion in global markets. Notably, in 2021, Kazatomprom and China General Energy Nuclear Power Company (CGENPC) established

a joint venture to produce low-enriched uranium assemblies using French production technology for Chinese nuclear power plants.¹¹ This development broke Russia's monopoly on enrichment of Kazakh uranium and marked a milestone in flourishing China-Kazakhstan cooperation in the nuclear energy sector.

Since the beginning of the war, the balancing act has become even more consequential and difficult. In late 2022, Rosatom's subsidiaries acquired a 49% stake in Kazakhstan's Budenovskoye mine, which is expected to become the world's single-largest source of uranium. It is reported that the decision was made despite protests from Kazatomprom's top managers.¹² In 2025, Astana announced Rosatom as the winner of the competition to build the first nuclear power plant. On the same day, however, a top government official mentioned the plan for CNNC to build the second plant.¹³ Given the growing strategic importance of Kazakhstan's uranium to Russia,

⁹ Johanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan jailed ex-nuclear boss suspects Russia's machinations," *Eurasianet*, May 21, 2013. (<https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-jailed-ex-nuclear-boss-suspects-russian-machinations>)

¹⁰ "Kak Muhtar Dhakishev sporil s Putinyim" [How Mukhtar Dzhakishev argued with Putin], *Forbes.kz*, February 15, 2021. (https://forbes.kz/articles/mukhtar_djakishev_o_tom_kak_spor_s_vladimirom_putinyim_mog_stat_odnoy_iz_prichin_ego_aresta)

¹¹ "Kazakh-Chinese joint venture completes fuel qualification certification", *Nuclear Engineering Interna-*

tional, January 5, 2024. (<https://www.neimagazine.com/news/newskazakh-chinese-joint-venture-completes-fuel-qualification-certification-11413473>).

¹² Florence Jones, "Deal with Russia causes management walkout at Kazakh mining giant", *Mining Technology*, May 18, 2023, (<https://www.mining-technology.com/news/deal-with-russia-causes-management-walkout-at-kazakh-mining-giant/#?cf-view>).

¹³ *Eurasianet*, "Kazakhstan threads diplomatic needle, gives both Russia and China nuclear deals," 16 June 2025, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-threads->

China, France, and other actors, and the Kazakh government's determination to develop a full-fledged, diversified nuclear energy sector, competition and tensions are likely to intensify.

History as a Battlefield

History is another source of contention and a point of pressure. Revising and constructing new historical narratives, removing “white spots” and processing the past—including deep traumas such as famine and mass repressions—are at the core of Kazakhstan's nation-building project. Under President Tokayev, the processes intensified. In 2020, he issued a decree establishing the State Commission for the full rehabilitation of victims of political repression. Over the next three years, the commission engaged hundreds of scholars in archival research across the country, declassified more than two million documents, and rehabilitated more than 200 victims of political repressions in the 1920s to 1950s.¹⁴ The administration also relaunched the project of publishing seven volumes of the history of Kazakhstan from prehis-

toric times to the present day. The goal is to incorporate these and other new materials collected from archives around the world and to create an authoritative narrative that will help foster national identity. Kazakhstan's public is on board with these efforts, something evidenced by the popularity of books and multimedia projects shedding light on various pages of the national history.

Although this is a domestic nation-building process, it disturbs Russia, which feels entitled to shape common history narratives. Kazakhstan's push for rehabilitation of victims of political repression goes counter to the rehabilitation of Stalin and Stalinism in Russia. In 2022–2024, the Russian authorities reversed 4,000 decisions on the full rehabilitation of victims of political repressions made in the 1990s and 2000s. The efforts of Astana, the scholarly community, and the general public to study and reflect on the country's colonial and Soviet history clash with the narratives and interpretations currently dominant in Russia. The Putin regime has been actively and aggressively promoting distorted historical narratives, sanitizing and glorifying the past.¹⁵ It weaponized

diplomatic-needle-gives-both-russia-and-china-nuclear-deals.

¹⁴ Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Gosudarstvennaya komissiya po polnoi reabilitatsii zhertv politicheskikh repressii zavershila svoyu rabotu” [State Commission on Full Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repressions Has Completed Its Work], 26 December 2023.

(<https://www.akorda.kz/ru/gosudarstvennaya-komissiya-po-polnoy-reabilitacii-zhertv-politicheskikh-repressiy-zavershila-svoyu-rabotu-2611356>.)

¹⁵ Sanat Kushkumbayev and Aigerim Bakhtiyarova, “Navigating Complex Narratives: Understanding

such narratives to justify its aggression against Ukraine.

Thus, it is not surprising that developments in Kazakhstan have been causing irritation in Russia, reflected in negative coverage in Russian media. Some Russian politicians and media personalities started drawing parallels between Kazakhstan and Ukraine. Participants of the roundtable “Russia in the textbooks of history of the CIS countries: Ally or Colonizer?” held in Moscow in April 2025, concluded that Kazakhstan’s history textbooks contain “russo-phobic and pan-Turkic narratives” and “corrode historical truth,” which they argued has negative implications for the national security of Russia. Ominously, accusations of “Rus-sophobia” and “corrosion of historic truth” featured prominently in the justification of war against Ukraine.¹⁶

The divergent trajectories affected Kazakh scholars and their access to Russian archives. There have been multiple cases of Kazakh historians finding out upon arrival in Russia that

they were not allowed to enter the country. Archival collections relevant for the study of the colonial and Soviet history of Kazakhstan have been reclassified “for restricted use only.” Only scholars who do not study “sensitive” topics such as collectivization, famine, repression, and deportations can continue having access to Russian archives, promoting self-censorship.¹⁷

The Russian pressure forces the Tokayev government to tread more carefully. It had to “lower the flame” on the project to rehabilitate victims of political repressions. The State Commission had its last meeting in December 2023. Earlier that year, Kazakhstan’s Ministry of Higher Education and Science published a document containing recommendations on topics and issues that Kazakhstani scholars should avoid discussing in media interviews. Undesirable topics include, but are not limited to, problems of colonialism, famine in the 1920s and 1930s, and forced migrations and repressions of Kazakhs.¹⁸

Challenges of Russian-related Research in Kazakhstan,” *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 43 no. 2, 2024, pp. 286-294.

¹⁶ Aziyat Akishev, “Dekostrukciya propagandy: Kak poyavilos klishe o russofobii i kak ono ispolzuyetsya protiv Kazahstana” [Deconstruction of Propaganda: How the cliché of Russophobia appeared and how it was used against Kazakhstan], Factcheck.kz, August 14, 2025. (<https://factcheck.kz/dekonstrukciya-propagandy/kak-poyavilos-klishe-o-rusofobii-i-kak-ono-ispolzuetsya-protiv-kazahstana>)

¹⁷ Radio Azattyq, “‘Okolo 70 nashih uchenyh’ Desyat-kam issledovatelei iz Kazahstana uzhe neskolko let zapreshen vyezd v Rossiyu” [“About 70 of our scholars.” Dozens of researchers from Kazakhstan have been banned from entering Russia over the last years], May 12, 2025. (<https://rus.azattyq.org/a/okolo-70-nashih-uchenyh-desyatkam-issledovateley-iz-kazahstana-uzhe-neskolko-let-zapreshen-vezd-v-rossiyu/33408204.html>)

¹⁸ Kushkumbayev and Bakhtiyarova, 289.

Conclusion

The year 2022 marked the end of the “Nazarbayev era” in Kazakhstan and the end of the “post-Soviet order.” Kazakhstan has entered a new stage of nation-building, seeking to strengthen its identity and eager to cooperate and trade with the West, while Russia is increasingly anti-Western, autarchic, and stuck in the dream of reviving past Russian-Soviet imperial glory. The two countries are on divergent paths, and this growing gap in their directions of travel is becoming increasingly difficult to bridge. The contentious dynamics in nuclear energy and history writing exemplify this trend.

Both Kazakhstan and Russia feel insecure, which makes relations even more difficult. Putin’s foreign and domestic policies feed on the narrative of Russia being assaulted by the

West. There is less tolerance for Kazakhstan’s multi-vector foreign policy, as frequent expressions of irritation and threatening remarks by Russian politicians and opinion-makers make apparent. This makes Kazakhstan feel worried and insecure, creating more incentives to diversify its economic, political, and security ties away from Russia. This insecurity dilemma, similar to the classical “security dilemma,” risks escalating.

The Tokayev government’s approach has been to accommodate Russia as much as possible. In his words, Kazakhstan and Russia are “doomed to have eternal allied relations and friendship.”¹⁹ The imperative, however, is to foster Kazakhstan’s sovereignty. Tensions between these goals necessitate constant calibration and tradeoffs, a tricky but unavoidable path.



¹⁹ Bekbosyn Toksan, “Tokayev: Kazakhstan i Rossiya obrecheny na vechnoe soyuznichestvo i druzhbu” [Tokayev: Kazakhstan and Russia are doomed to eternal allied relationship and friendship], *Forbes.kz*, October 10, 2025, <https://forbes.kz/articles/tokayev->

[kazakhstan-i-rossiya-obrecheny-na-vechnoe-soyuznichestvo-i-druzhbu-18c7db](https://forbes.kz/articles/tokayev-kazakhstan-i-rossiya-obrecheny-na-vechnoe-soyuznichestvo-i-druzhbu-18c7db).