



Feature Article
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Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy: Managing the Major Powers

Svante E. Cornell

Kazakhstan has been deeply affected by the geopolitical turmoil across the region in the past several years, which threatened to undermine the viability of the country's multi-vector, balanced foreign policy. But Kazakhstan's leaders have stayed the course, which has for twenty years sought to balance relations with Russia through the expansion of ties with powers ranging from China to the U.S. and Europe. In recent years, Kazakhstan has also embraced regional cooperation in Central Asia, while strengthening ties with Turkey as well. The continued success of this approach remains crucial to the continued independence and stability of Central Asia as a whole.

Events in the past several years have put the whole of Central Asia under greater geopolitical and economic pressure. Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the growing economic warfare between Russia and the West, Central Asian states have been caught in the middle – and none more so than Kazakhstan, an upper-middle income country with an ambition to find its place among the world's most developed nations.

Because of the country's long border with Russia and its historical and demographic connections to its northern neighbor, Kazakhstan has sought to maintain close ties to Moscow while simulta-



Presidents Erdoğan and Tokayev in Astana, October 2022.

(akorda.kz)

neously seeking to assert its statehood and develop economic and political ties with the rest of the world. But successive shocks – from the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Covid-19 pandemic to the Russian invasion of Ukraine – have contributed to

a heightened vulnerability to external shocks, all while Kazakhstan is in the midst of an effort to reform the relationship between society and state in a modern and progressive direction.

This essay delves into Kazakhstan's efforts to counter these negative trends, by exploring the efforts that Astana has taken to mitigate the fall-out of successive crises and rebalance its relations with major powers.

Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy and Multivectoralism

Kazakhstan's foreign policy has been shaped by the country's precarious geographic and demographic reality. It is the only Central Asian country to border Russia, and had an economy at independence that was intimately tied to its large northern neighbor. More industrialized than its southern neighbors, Kazakhstan also had a very large ethnic Russian population, almost equal in number to Kazakhs in 1989. To build independent statehood and find a place in the world under these conditions required astute diplomacy and assertiveness.

An immediate example of this was Kazakhstan's first major diplomatic initiative. At his first appearance at the UN General Assembly in 1992, President Nursultan Nazarbayev proposed the creation of a Conference on Interaction and Confidence-building in Asia, an analogous institution to Europe's OSCE. This initiative was

doubtless a surprise, coming from a newly independent state. But through continued dedication to the idea, Kazakhstan would succeed in making CICA a reality. This initiative provided an early indication of Kazakhstan's ambition to establish itself on the international scene as a proactive force and a contributor to international peace and security.

In the 1990s, Kazakhstan focused on building and implementing a conceptual basis for its long-term foreign policy. This concept was developed jointly by President Nazarbayev and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who was then Foreign Minister and is currently President of Kazakhstan.

The challenge was to assert statehood and agency in a geography where Kazakhstan and its Central Asian neighbors were surrounded by larger powers, and where they risked becoming the object of a zero-sum game where the players would be those outside powers. Kazakhstan, however, developed a strategy for dealing with this complex reality. Its goal was to balance Russian dominance in order to safeguard and consolidate independence. But it did so through a comprehensive approach based on the concept of *positive* balance, i.e., by balancing close relations with Russia by building close relations with China, as well as the United States and Europe. This thesis was laid out in a 1997 book published by Mr. Tokayev.¹ Tokayev's concept

¹ Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, *Pod Styagom Nezavisimosti: Ocherki o Vneshnei Politike Kazakhstana* [Under the Banner of Independence: Essays on the Foreign Pol-

icy of Kazakhstan]. Almaty: Bilim, 1997. Also S. Frederick Starr, "Kazakhstan's Security Strategy: A Model for Central Asia?" *Central Asia Affairs*, no. 3, January 2007, p. 4.

was enunciated in President Nazarbayev's address *Kazakhstan 2030*, adopted the same year:

To ensure our independence and territorial integrity, we must be a strong state and maintain friendly relations with our neighbours, which is why we shall develop and consolidate relations of confidence and equality with our closest and historically equal neighbour—Russia. Likewise we shall develop just as confident and good-neighbourly relations with the PRC [People's Republic of China] on a mutually advantageous basis. Kazakhstan welcomes the policy pursued by China for it is aimed against hegemonism and favours friendship with neighbouring countries.²

This description of China as a non-hegemonic power is of particular interest. In the Central Asian context, "hegemony" could only be understood as referring to Russian domination. As we shall see, concerns of China's future economic domination have existed from the start in Kazakhstan, but have not prevented Astana from continuously developing its relationship with Beijing. But in the spirit of "positive" balance, it did so not instead of but in parallel to its relations with Russia. Tokayev explicitly used the term "balance" in describing Kazakhstan's foreign relations, noting the strategic relationships with both Russia and China. Following this, Kazakhstan sought to broaden its energy security by building an oil pipeline to China in 2005. The

challenge was to balance relations with the great powers in ways that would be mutually beneficial, minimize the worst tendencies of each partner, and strengthen the sovereignty and independence of Kazakhstan.³

Kazakhstan's strategy was based on balancing Russia's role through relations with China; but simultaneously, to reach further and establish relations with other powers to reduce Kazakhstan's dependence on these two large neighbors. Thus, Kazakhstan has worked actively to develop relations with the U.S., EU and Türkiye, as well as Asian powers like Japan, Korea and India. This, then, is the basis for the notion of a "multi-vector" foreign policy.

A further step in the building of Kazakhstan's place in the world was the country's active engagement within multilateral institutions – something this author elsewhere termed an additional "vector" in Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy.⁴ Kazakhstan's nuclear diplomacy at independence – whereby it leveraged the renunciation of the nuclear weapons left on its territory to raise its international profile – placed it well to pursue closer cooperation within the framework of United Nations organizations. Furthermore, Kazakhstan took on an active role within the OSCE and made a successful bid to chair this organization in 2010. Similarly, Kazakhstan approached cooperation with NATO

² See "Kazakhstan 2030," *Embassy of Kazakhstan to the United States website*, <http://kazakhembus.com/Kazakhstan2030.html>; emphasis added

³ Starr, "Kazakhstan's Security Strategy: A Model for Central Asia?" p.8.

⁴ Svante E. Cornell and Johan Engvall, "Fourth Vector: Making Sense of Kazakhstan's Activism in International Organizations," ISDP Policy Brief, December 22, 2015. (<https://isdp.eu/publication/fourth-vector-making-sense-kazakhstans-activism-international-organizations/>)

more systematically than any of its neighbors, and subsequently also approached the Council of Europe and the OECD, aspiring to closer approximation and even membership in the latter organization. The purpose of this multilateral diplomacy was the same as with Kazakhstan's outreach to the world's major powers: build a web of relations that would give a maximum number of influential actors on the international scene a stake in Kazakhstan sovereignty and success.

In the 2000s and 2010s, Kazakhstan would build on this by mounting a successful bid to chair the OSCE, gain a seat in the UN Security Council, and take a role as a mediator in a series of important international disputes and conflicts, not least through holding Astana talks on Syria, and seeking a role in mitigating the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2014-15.

Eurasian Integration vs Central Asian Cooperation

Kazakhstan has, from the start, been an ardent supporter of regional cooperation. The problem is that it came to face a conceptual (and very real) tension between two models of regionalism. One was the cooperation on a Central Asian level between sovereign countries on an equal basis. The

other was the advancement of Eurasian integration, pushed for by Russia, which sought to build supranational institutions.

Kazakhstan initially did not see any conflict between Central Asian and Eurasian regionalism, seeing the two as complementary. In 1994, in a speech in Moscow, Nazarbayev advanced the notion of an Eurasian Economic Union, which would safeguard the economic benefits of continued cooperation among former Soviet states. In practice, however, Kazakhstan worked to advance regional cooperation in Central Asia. The same year, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan agreed to create a single economic space, which Kyrgyzstan immediately asked to join. This led to the creation of the Central Asian Economic Union, later renamed the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO). President Nazarbayev touted its creation in his meeting with President Clinton in 1997, indicating the importance Kazakhstan attached to it.⁵ In subsequent years, however, security troubles in southern Central Asia led to roadblocks in the development of Central Asian cooperation. Moreover, Russian efforts to promote pan-Eurasian cooperation instead of Central Asian cooperation would further complicate matters following Vladimir Putin's arrival to power in 1999.⁶

⁵ See readout of the Nazarbayev-Clinton meeting in the appendix in S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, *Strong and Unique: Three Decades of U.S.-Kazakhstan Partnership*, Washington: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2022. (<https://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13428>)

⁶ See extensive discussion in Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, *Modernization and Regional Cooperation in Central Asia*, Washington & Stockholm: Silk Road Paper, 2018.

The problem was the inherent tension between Central Asian cooperation and Eurasian integration, led by Moscow. In 2000, soon after Vladimir Putin gained power, he proposed the creation of the Eurasian Economic Community (EURASEC), a precursor to the Eurasian Union established fifteen years later. Moscow saw the emergence of Central Asian cooperation as a challenge to the objective of Russia-led Eurasian integration – and thus, Russia asked for observer status in CACO. Shortly thereafter, it asked for full membership – and eventually, strongarmed the Central Asian states into dissolving CACO when its membership overlapped with EURASEC.

The subsequent creation of the Eurasian Economic Union posed significant challenges for Kazakhstan. While Putin credited Nazarbayev with the idea of such a union, it was immediately obvious that their respective visions of Eurasian cooperation were very different. Where Nazarbayev had foreseen an organization of sovereign states focused on economic cooperation, Putin saw a supranational body that resembled a hybrid of the European Union and Soviet Union – which Moscow, given the huge size differential among members, would control. Internal debates within the Kazakh government on the merits of joining the Eurasian Union were heated, with many arguing this would endanger Kazakhstan's sovereignty. But Nazarbayev decided that Kazakhstan really did not have a choice and acceded to the organization.

Buyer's remorse soon set in, however, as it became clear that membership in the Eurasian Union forced Kazakhstan to open its market to Russian goods, whereas it soon became equally clear that Russia would not reciprocate. A trade war ensued, as Kazakhstan sought to limit the damage to its domestic producers of the inflow of Russian goods whose prices had been dumped as a result of the devaluation of the ruble.⁷

When an opportunity presented itself, therefore, Kazakhstan was more than happy to refocus its effort toward Central Asian cooperation. This opportunity arose when Uzbekistan's long-time president Islam Karimov, whose relations with other Central Asian leaders had been rather strained, passed away in 2016. He was replaced by Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who immediately embarked on a rapid initiative to improve Uzbekistan's relations with Central Asian states, and made Tashkent a champion of regional cooperation. Since then, a new spirit of regionalism has developed across Central Asia, with much closer consultation and cooperation among the five states than ever before. The main weakness of Central Asian cooperation, however, is that it lacks dedicated institutions, perhaps a testament to the fate of CACO two decades ago. As Central Asian states seek to develop the ties among themselves, a key challenge will be to insulate them from the relationships with powers like Russia and China that remain key to all regional states.

⁷ "Trade War Mounts Between Kazakhstan and Russia," *Moscow Times*, April 13, 2015.

(<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/04/13/trade-war-mounts-between-kazakhstan-and-russia-a45711>)

A Changing Russia Calculus

Since independence, Kazakhstan's greatest, and its only existential, challenge has been to build an independent state while maintaining normal relations with Russia. By any standard, this worked beyond expectation for around thirty years. While former President Nursultan Nazarbayev's legacy is presently being questioned because of the rise of corruption and inequality during his rule, it is clear that Nazarbayev was highly successful in building Kazakhstan's statehood while maintaining positive relations with Moscow.

In 1989, Kazakhs barely outnumbered Russians, 40 % to 38%, and at independence this posed the existential challenge: how to build a sovereign nation-state in a country where there were almost as many Russians as Kazakhs? Nazarbayev did so by stressing a civic identity based on Kazakhstani citizenship, while emphasizing close ties to Russia and a commitment to Eurasian cooperation – but meanwhile quietly but very doggedly building the institutions of independent statehood. The out-migration of ethnic Russians combined with continued differences in fertility and mortality rates as well as the resettlement of over one million ethnic Kazakhs from surrounding countries contributed to changing the demographic balance.⁸ As a result, today Kazakhs are

estimated to form 70% of the population and Russians only 15%.

This demographic shift also comes with social changes. A young post-Soviet generation of lower- and middle-class Kazakhs has emerged that is much more nationalist than previous generations. Along with this comes a rediscovery of Kazakh history. It is unavoidable that this reappraisal of events including the politically induced famines of the 1930s – which traditionally were papered over or classified as a “mistake” – will lead to a growth of Kazakh nationalism with less than positive views of Russia.⁹ For the time being, the dominance of Russian media is mitigating this process, as is government policy emphasizing tolerance and inter-ethnic harmony. But only recently, steps such as the opening of Soviet KGB archives and the rehabilitation of victims of Communist repression are part of the changing view of history in the country.¹⁰

The broader development, however, is that Kazakhstan's society is inexorably moving further away from Russia as time passes. Kazakhstan's median age is just under 30 years, implying that half of the population was not born when the USSR collapsed, and an even greater percentage have little or no memories of it – and do not necessarily see Russia as a point of reference.

⁸ “Nearly 1 Million Kazakhs Have Resettled In Kazakhstan Since 1991,” *RFE/RL*, January 16, 2015. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-ethnic-kazakhs-oralman-return-uzbekistan-turkmenistan-china/26796879.html>)

⁹ Rudolf A. Mark, “The Famine in Kazakhstan: Historical Reappraisals,” *Osteuropa*, vol. 54 no. 12, 2004, pp. 112-130. For an example of recent Kazakh

research, see K.A. Yensenov et. al., “History of Famine in Kazakhstan (1931-1933)”, *PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology*, vol. 17 no. 6, 2020, 622 - 633.

¹⁰ Baktygul Chynybaeva, “Kazakhstan Opens Secret KGB Archives Amid Moves Toward Decolonization In Central Asia,” *RFE/RL*, November 12, 2023. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-opens-kgb-archives-russian-criticism/32681381.html>)

The growing separation between Kazakhstan and Russia has been accelerated by political development, and by the rise of a leader, President Tokayev, who is highly responsive to the prevailing views of society. In recent years, for example, Tokayev finalized the decision to shift to the Latin alphabet over Russian objections, citing the move as part of the “spiritual modernization” of the country (the new alphabet is still in working progress, though).¹¹ The Russian invasion of Ukraine appears to have hastened this development. Tokayev’s decision to publicly explain to Putin that Kazakhstan will not recognize what it considers to be “quasi-state” entities in eastern Ukraine stands out as the only case of a post-Soviet leader doing so in the Russian leader’s presence.¹² This served as powerful indication that President Tokayev would be accountable to Kazakh society, whether or not this aligned with Moscow’s wishes.

Russian approaches to Kazakhstan have further led to a sense of estrangement. In 2014, President Putin had stated that Kazakhstan “had never had any statehood” and should “remain in the Russian world,” a concept Moscow had launched to legitimize its conquest of Ukrainian territory.¹³ This sparked an angry reaction in Kazakh society.

Conversely, Kazakhstan’s refusal to endorse Moscow’s war in Ukraine in 2022 was followed by an aggressive reaction in Russian state-controlled media, with senior figures pondering whether Russia should target Kazakhstan next after Ukraine.¹⁴ This reaction was particularly visceral because of Moscow’s apparent expectation that Astana would endorse its position following the CSTO mission in Kazakhstan in January 2022, which helped maintain order following the violence in the Almaty and other parts of Kazakhstan.

In addition, Moscow on several occasions closed the CPC pipeline that exports most of Kazakhstan’s oil, because of alleged “environmental violations,” alleged storm damage in the port of Novorossiysk, and World War II era mines allegedly discovered in the port. It is clear that this led alarm bells to go off in Astana, and confirmed suspicions that the CPC route, which had served Kazakhstan well for 20 years, was no longer as reliable as previously thought.

Russian actions had profoundly counter-productive effects, leading to the alienation of segments of Kazakhstan’s society that had otherwise been positively disposed towards Russia. A May 2023 poll indicated that almost a third of respondents’

¹¹ Soso Dzamukashvili, “Kazakhstan’s Alphabet Switch Reflects Wider Societal Changes,” *Emerging Europe*, October 12, 2021. (<https://emerging-europe.com/news/kazakhstan-alphabet-switch-reflects-wider-societal-changes/>)

¹² “Kazakhstan Does Not Recognize Quasi-State Entities – President Tokayev,” *inform.kz*, June 18, 2022. (https://www.inform.kz/en/kazakhstan-does-not-recognize-quasi-state-entities-president-tokayev_a3945894)

¹³ “Putin Downplays Kazakh Independence, Sparks Angry Reaction,” *RFE/RL*, September 3, 2014. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-putin-history-reaction-nation/26565141.html>)

¹⁴ Nicholas Velazquez, “Kazakhstan Pivots from Russia amid Ukraine War,” *Geopolitical Monitor*, July 14, 2022. (<https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/kazakhstan-pivots-from-russia-amid-ukraine-war/>)

views of Russia had worsened as a result of the Ukraine war, while less than 5 percent reported their views of Russia had improved. While most Kazakhs are neutral toward the war, only 13 percent support Russia, while over 21 percent support Ukraine.¹⁵

Kazakhstan's approach to Russia had, as noted, been predicated on the notion that it would be possible to maintain good relations with Russia while building Kazakhstan's sovereignty by balancing reliance on Russia through expanded relations with other powers and multilateral institutions. That, in turn, required that the basic norms of international politics continued to be respected. Unfortunately, what has been visible in the past two decades is a gradual erosion of the respect for those principles, particularly by larger powers. More specifically, the basic reality facing Astana is that Russia no longer feels bound by international norms such as the respect for the principle of territorial integrity of states in the former Soviet sphere. Kazakhstan along with Azerbaijan, the only post-Soviet state bordering Russia whose sovereignty and integrity has thus far not been compromised. And unlike Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan has an ethnic Russian minority that makes it uniquely vulnerable to a nationalist or revanchist regime in Moscow, and it does not have a Defense Treaty with a NATO power, as Azerbaijan does with Türkiye since June 2021.

This does not mean that excessive parallels should be drawn between Kazakhstan and

Ukraine. Astana's historical relationship to Russia is not comparable to Ukraine's, and its approach to Russia is very different as well. Still, given the shifting demands of the Kremlin, it is a relevant question how Kazakhstan should act to avoid a confrontation with Russia. As such, the future of Russian-Kazakh relations depends overwhelmingly on two interrelated factors: Russia's fortunes in Ukraine, and the continued evolution of the Russian state.

For now, Kazakhstan has sought to manage relations with Russia in the same way it always has – by continued close dialogue with its northern neighbor. President Tokayev has met President Vladimir Putin on a regular basis. But the agenda of talks is more tense than in the past, as several new elements resulting from the war have complicated the bilateral agenda. First, the Western sanctions regime on Russia has forced Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states to comply, including by closing down Russian banks' operations, among many other difficult steps that hurt not only Russian interests but their own economic situation. This has also led to a host of efforts by private actors to benefit from circumventing the sanctions regime – for example, Kazakhstan saw a massive rise in the import of household appliances and other goods, which are re-exported to Russia. For the government, sifting through all this activity is a risky and complicated task as each step taken can trigger a reaction either from Russia or the United States and Europe.

¹⁵ "Kazakhs increasingly wary of Russia's belligerence, poll shows," Reuters, May 17, 2023.

(<https://www.reuters.com/world/kazakhs-increasingly-wary-russias-belligerence-poll-2023-05-17>)

Secondly, Kazakhstan has had to deal with an influx of large numbers of Russians – perhaps up to 400,000 – who left Russia following the September 2022 mobilization announcement. While the majority of these have moved on to other countries, the influx of Russian migrants has led to the visible rise of apartment rental costs, particularly in Almaty. This influx thus provides both challenges as well as economic opportunity for Kazakhstan.

Kazakh leaders certainly understand the changing environment they are living in and are planning accordingly. On one hand, Kazakhstan is moving to diversify its exports of energy – a serious challenge that is described in detail in a recent article in this series.¹⁶ Kazakhstan also increased its military budget by nearly 50%, adding almost US\$1 billion to its defense.¹⁷ As will be seen, President Tokayev has worked to intensify relations with other powers including in the defense sector.

It thus appears that Russian actions particularly since 2014, when Moscow first invaded Ukraine, set in motion a process that triggered Kazakhstan to move further away from Russia and shore up its independence and defense.

Long Term vs Short Term: China's Embrace

China is a central counterpart in Kazakhstan's foreign policy. As noted, the leadership of Kazakhstan identified China as the main power on which Astana could build its foreign policy based on positive balance. This policy correctly assumed that as China expands its international footprint, it will consistently seek to expand its relations with Central Asian states and grow to be a major external player in the region, capable of balancing Moscow. In the medium term, this policy has been absolutely critical to the building of Kazakhstan's sovereignty. In the long term, the question is whether the region risks replacing Moscow's hegemony with Beijing's.

To get to the long term, however, one has to manage the short term. It is thus no coincidence that Astana has sought to build a stable partnership with Beijing. At first, this relationship was primarily economic. Analysts agreed that an unspoken "division of labor" existed, whereby Beijing expanded its role in the economy of Central Asia, while security matters were left to Moscow's remit. Whether this characterization was ever entirely correct could be disputed. What is clear is that it was never realistic to expect China to maintain its focus solely on the economic realm. In fact, there was simultaneous agreement that China's overarching priority in Central Asia was related not to business but security: ensuring that Turkic Central Asia did not become a haven for

¹⁶ Svante E. Cornell and Brenda Shaffer, "A New Spring for Caspian Transit and Trade," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, October 17, 2023. (https://cacian-alyt.org/resources/231017_FT_Caspian.pdf)

¹⁷ Evan Gershkovich, "Putin's Unexpected Challenge: Snubs from His Central Asian Allies," *Wall Street Journal*, July 24, 2022. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-ukraine-kazakhstan-central-asia-11658439761>)

Turkic Uyghur separatism in China's Western province of Xinjiang. This, from the outset, made China very much an interested party in Central Asia's security.

This also provided the foundation for an often overlooked distinction – and possibly a looming conflict – between Russian and Chinese interests in Central Asia. The two powers have a common agenda in preventing the expansion of Western influence in the region. But as has been seen repeatedly in the South Caucasus, Ukraine, Moldova as well as in Kyrgyzstan, Moscow is not opposed to the destabilization of former Soviet states, a notion often termed “controlled instability” – whereby Moscow, in the words of Vladimir Socor, has “fostered local conflicts in order to create openings for Russia to step in as arbiter and manipulate the parties to the conflict against each other.”¹⁸ Beijing, by contrast, is strongly opposed to any destabilization of Central Asia, as it calculates that such instability would provide a fertile environment for Uyghur separatism to grow.

Kazakhstan also stands out in China's approach to Central Asia, not least because of Kazakhstan's developed economy and its role as the main land corridor linking China with Europe. While China has worked to build additional corridors – for example through Pakistan, as well as a projected

railroad through Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan – Kazakhstan has the benefits of a relatively developed infrastructure, and most importantly a single jurisdiction linking the Chinese border with either the Caspian Sea or Russia, from where goods can transit to Europe, China's biggest trading partner. This has led Kazakhstan to be termed as the “buckle” in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative or BRI.

Indeed, Chinese leader Xi Jinping launched this massive initiative in 2013 with a speech in the Kazakh capital, indicating the importance Beijing attaches to Kazakhstan. Given that BRI is variously termed the Chinese leader's “signature policy” or “pet project,”¹⁹ it is clear that this strategic view of Kazakhstan also implies a commitment to the country's stability. This was visible in the aftermath of the January 2022 events and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as the growing threats against Kazakhstan in Russian state-controlled media. Xi Jinping in September 2022 made Astana the destination of his first foreign trip since the Covid-19 pandemic began, and speaking in Astana, Xi stated that:

No matter how the international situation changes, we will continue to strongly support Kazakhstan in defending its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, firmly support the reforms you are carrying out to

¹⁸ “US Presence in Central Asia Worries Moscow,” Voa News, May 6, 2002. (<https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2002-05-06-10-us-67269592/379728.html>)

¹⁹ “Belt and road forum ‘a showcase’ for China's growing global influence,” *South China Morning Post*, October 16, 2023.

(<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3238087/belt-and-road-forum-showcase-chinas-growing-global-influence>); “Belt and Road Initiative: Is China's trillion-dollar gamble worth it?” BBC, October 17, 2023. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-67120726>)

ensure stability and development and oppose the interference of any forces in the internal affairs of your country.²⁰

These words were reiterated in an article published in the Chinese leader's name in *Kazhanskaya Pravda*.²¹ While Xi did not name the possible external forces interfering in Kazakhstan's affairs, this was widely interpreted as a message to Moscow that Beijing would not countenance any steps to undermine Kazakhstan's sovereignty. It would not be the first time such a message had been sent – Chinese high-level figures have privately confirmed that they have communicated to Moscow the importance they attach to the stability of Central Asia and Kazakhstan in particular. Beijing took active steps to dissuade Moscow from a military intervention in Kyrgyzstan in 2010.²² Still, President Xi's statements should be considered a rare instance of a public Chinese statement on the matter.

Meanwhile, the global economic troubles have also seemingly led to a scaling down of the ambitions of the BRI project, which had assumed global proportions. Large-scale projects announced in Africa and the Middle East appeared uncoordinated, many did not materialize, and others raised criticism of being “debt traps” for developing countries. China has seen growing economic difficulties at home; and abroad, has witnessed a backlash to its increasingly aggressive approach to foreign relations with many countries in Europe and southeast Asia. This led to a growing body of commentariat opining on the “rise and fall” of the BRI, it being overextended, at a “dead end,” or its “wheels coming off.”²³ Such analysis may be hyperbolic, but the troubles with the BRI have led Beijing to seek to impose more stringency on the initiative and seek to refocus it once again on the core areas of Central Asia and Southeast Asia.²⁴ As far a Kazakhstan is concerned, it differs from several of its

²⁰ Assel Satubaldina, “China's President Xi Jinping Pays State Visit to Kazakhstan, Confirming Excellent Relations Between Neighbouring Countries,” *Astana Times*, September 14, 2022.

(<https://astanatimes.com/2022/09/chinas-president-xi-jinping-pays-state-visit-to-kazakhstan-confirming-excellent-relations-between-neighbouring-countries/>)

²¹ The article is available in translation at: http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/topnews/2022-09/14/content_78418701.htm

²² Stephen Blank, “A Sino-Uzbek Axis in Central Asia?” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, September 1, 2010. (<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12123>)

²³ Nadia Clark, “The Rise and Fall of the BRI,” Council on Foreign Relations, April 6, 2023

(<https://www.cfr.org/blog/rise-and-fall-bri>); James Griffiths, “Belt and Road: Are wheels coming off China's megaproject?” CNN, December 31, 2018. (<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/12/31/asia/china-kenya-belt-road-bri-intl/index.html>); Peter Wolff, “Is China's Silk Road Initiative at a Dead End?” *The Current Column*, May 15, 2017. (<https://www.idos-research.de/en/the-current-column/article/is-chinas-silk-road-initiative-at-a-dead-end/>)

²⁴ Jevans Nyabiage, “Kazakhstan remains central to Beijing's plans for belt and road as China sets sights on Europe,” *South China Morning Post*, October 22, 2023. (<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3238660/kazakhstan-remains-central-beijings-plans-belt-and-road-china-sets-sights-europe>)

smaller neighbors by having eschewed large-scale debt to China for infrastructure projects.²⁵

Moreover, China has adapted to the fallout of the Ukraine war and is now focused increasingly on supporting the development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route. Seeing a sharp fall in the volumes transported to Europe through the “northern” corridor across Russia and Belarus, it is now pouring resources into the Trans-Caspian route, thus aligning it on this matter with European interests. In other words, while politically Beijing may be expressing solidarity with Moscow, in economic matters China has taken steps to decouple its key initiative from Moscow. Again, that would not be the first time it happens: almost two decades ago, Beijing politely declined Moscow’s insistence that *all* trade between China and Europe be transported along the northern route crossing directly into Russia, insisting instead on making Kazakhstan a key transit point in the Chinese land routes to the West.²⁶

President Tokayev visited China in May 2023, and met bilaterally with his Chinese counterpart

ahead of the China-Central Asia Summit in Xi’an. At the meeting, Xi once again “emphasized that an independent, stable, and prosperous Kazakhstan meets the common interests of the Chinese and Kazakh people” and that “China firmly supports Kazakhstan in safeguarding national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.”²⁷ In October 2023, President Tokayev was in Beijing to attend the third Belt and Road Forum, and once again met with the Chinese President, who repeated Chinese assurances regarding Kazakhstan’s sovereignty.²⁸

There is no doubt that the relationship has strengthened following the rise to power of President Tokayev, a fluent Chinese speaker. Tokayev studied Chinese at the Beijing Language and Culture University in 1983-84, after which he served for five years at the Soviet Embassy in Beijing.²⁹ A remarkable partnership has emerged between China and Kazakhstan, with subtle but clear signals that China has emerged as a guarantor of stability in Central Asia, effectively providing deterrence against possible Russian adventurism in the region.

²⁵ While debt to China constitute close to half of the public debt of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, it is only between 6 and 7 percent of Kazakhstan’s public debt.

²⁶ S. Frederick Starr, “Looking West: China and Central Asia,” Testimony to the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 18, 2015. (https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Starr%20Testimony_3.18.15.pdf)

²⁷ “Kazakhstan and China reach new level of cooperation after President Tokayev’s state visit and China-Central Asia Summit,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, May 19, 2023.

(<https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/press/news/details/558390?lang=en>)

²⁸ “Xi Jinping Meets with Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, October 17, 2023.

(https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/3180_664322/3182_664326/202310/t20231017_11162183.html)

²⁹ See eg. “Kazakhstan President: He’s a very good teacher, strict but friendly,” CGTN, October 18, 2023. (<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-10-18/Kazakhstan-President-He-s-a-very-good-teacher-strict-but-friendly-1o0uBcXhI5O/index.html>)

The rise of this relationship is crucial to Kazakhstan's stability and prosperity in the short and medium term. It is not without cost, however. There is considerable fear of China in the Kazakh public, some of which dates back to the Sinophobia instilled by Soviet propaganda. As in Russia, there is concern that China has designs on Central Asian territory – something that has led to protests against Chinese attempts to lease agricultural land in Kazakhstan, in effect forcing the government to pass legislation prohibiting the lease or sale of land to foreign entities.³⁰ More recently, the treatment of ethnic Uyghurs and Kazakhs in Xinjiang, particularly the massive effort to send ethnic minorities to re-education camps, has led to rising resentment in Central Asia – but nowhere more so than in Kazakhstan, which has the closest ethnocultural ties to Xinjiang among the Central Asian states.

Realistically, however, Kazakhstan's hands are tied on this issue, as Astana is in no position to allow its territory to become a haven for exile groups struggling against Chinese policies in Xinjiang. But depending on how the situation in Xinjiang develops, Chinese policies there are generating a considerable headache for the Kazakh leadership, as modern technology makes it essentially impossible to prevent the spread of news of developments in Xinjiang to the Kazakh public. As public opinion turns increasingly anti-Chinese, this will test the ability of the Kazakh gov-

ernment to maintain its strategic approach to geopolitical balance, in which China plays a major role.

Türkiye, a Re-emerging Partner

Türkiye's engagement with Central Asia has varied considerably over time. Türkiye enthusiastically welcomed the independence of the Central Asian states, and in the 1990s flirted with Pan-Turkist notions of a future confederation of Turkic states. Such romantic notions were dashed by the resurgence of Russian influence in the region, as well as the simple fact that Ankara overestimated its attractiveness to Central Asian leaders and populations. With the arrival to power of the Islamist AKP in 2002, Türkiye shifted its interests increasingly to the core Middle East, and exhibited only limited interest in the secular states of Central Asia.

However, in recent years, shifts in Türkiye and the broader region have led to a resurgence of Turkish activity. The main shift has been domestic, with a clearly visible shift of emphasis from the Islamist orientation of the AKP to a more nationalist orientation that is increasingly hegemonic in Turkish society, and strongly entrenched in the military and intelligence bureaucracies. With this rise of nationalism – and the crushing of hopes for a dominant role in Middle Eastern affairs that some Islamists had harbored – has come a surge in interest for Central Asia and the Caucasus. This interest has been manifest

³⁰ Jessica Neafie, "Anti-Chinese Sentiment, the BRI, and COVID-19: Kazakhstani Perceptions of China in Central Asia," in Jean-Francois Caron and Helène

Thibault, *Central Asia and the Covid-19 Pandemic*, Singapore: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022.

both in economic and security terms, the latter most prominent in the Caucasus, where Türkiye actively assisted Azerbaijan in restoring its territorial integrity in the fall of 2020.

From a Central Asian perspective, this assertion of Turkish influence in the South Caucasus was remarkable, not only because it succeeded in achieving its objective but because Moscow grudgingly tolerated this development. There are a number of reasons for this, the most prominent being Moscow's interest in maintaining a positive relationship with Ankara and seeking to encourage Türkiye's role as a "spoiler" in NATO. Similarly to China's rise in Central Asia, Moscow appears willing to tolerate the rising influence of a power that it views as non-Western and in some ways aligned with its own opposition to "Western hegemony" in world politics.

A major development linking Türkiye with Central Asia was the transformation of the Turkic Council into the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) in 2021. This organization is now widely seen as a vehicle for Turkish influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus, but this view is somewhat exaggerated. In fact, during the period in which Türkiye's interest in Central Asia was limited, Kazakhstan (together with Azerbaijan) was a main driver of the development of Turkic cooperation. Indeed, initiatives such as the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY) or the Turkic-Speaking Parliamentary Assembly were driven by these countries rather than by Ankara. More broadly, the relationship between Türkiye and the Central Asian states in the OTS differs from Russian and Chinese ap-

proaches simply because of the lower size differential. The population of the other members of the OTS is roughly equivalent to Türkiye's population, and their combined GDP is slightly less than half of Türkiye's. In other words, it is more a relationship of equals than could ever be the case with China or Russia, particularly now that Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are actively involved.

Still, there is no question that Türkiye fits hand in glove with Kazakhstan's objective to develop relationships with non-regional powers in order to strengthen its foreign policy of balance. Türkiye is particularly attractive because of its security and military prowess. Indeed, as Azerbaijan has shown, it is possible for a post-Soviet state to develop close military and security relations with Türkiye without causing an immediate and adverse Russian reaction – which would be unlikely in the case of any other NATO country. Furthermore, Türkiye is the western end of the Trans-Caspian transportation corridor, and its growing activity in seeking to facilitate the development of this corridor is also in line with Astana's priorities.

It is thus natural that the ties between Astana and Ankara have developed rapidly. When President Tokayev visited Ankara in May 2022, the two leaders announced the intensification of the strategic partnership between the countries. Tokayev noted how Türkiye would play a significant role in Kazakhstan's efforts to diversify its oil and gas

exports through the Caspian Sea.³¹ They also upgraded defense cooperation between the two countries, which had intensified since 2020, when the two countries signed an agreement to deepen cooperation in defense industry, intelligence, exercises and cyber defense.

During Tokayev's May 2022 visit, the countries further enhanced their cooperation, including the announcement of a license agreement for Kazakhstan to produce Turkish ANKA attack drones.³² This cooperation is closely linked with the growth of Azerbaijani-Kazakh defense cooperation: on May 12, 2022, a high-level military delegation from Kazakhstan visited Azerbaijan, where the Azerbaijani side explicitly showcased its military reforms under the Turkish model.³³ A trilateral cooperation format among the three countries has also emerged, whereby foreign and transport ministers meet periodically to advance the development of the transport corridors for both energy and goods linking Central Asia to Türkiye across the Caspian. It is to be expected that this trilateral format will expand into the fur-

ther fields relevant to security issues, as has happened in the analogous trilateral format linking Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Georgia.³⁴

Erdogan reciprocated by visiting Kazakhstan in October 2022, a visit during which they two sides committed to doubling their trade turnover to \$10 billion. In addition, Erdogan stressed the importance of ensuring the "security, stability, territorial integrity, and the economic well-being of Kazakhstan."³⁵

In sum, Türkiye has emerged as a serious player in both the economic and security fields, and thus an important partner for Kazakhstan as it seeks to navigate the new geopolitical environment it finds itself in. It remains to be seen whether Türkiye will be able to establish a lasting influence in Central Asia. No one expects its role in the region to be similar to what it has become in the South Caucasus. However, it appears that Türkiye could play an active role in supporting the strengthening of defense capacities across Central Asia, and nowhere more so than in Kazakhstan. This has the added benefit of helping to bring Kazakhstan in line with NATO standards,

³¹ Assel Satubaldina, "Kazakhstan and Türkiye Determined to Advance Strategic Partnership Through Investment and Business Cooperation," *Astana Times*, ay 11, 2022.

(<https://astanatimes.com/2022/05/kazakhstan-and-turkey-determined-to-advance-strategic-partnership-through-investment-and-business-cooperation/>)

³² Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan seals deal to produce Turkish drones under license", *Eurasianet*, May 13, 2022. (<https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-seals-deal-to-produce-turkish-drones-under-license>)

³³ "Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan discuss prospects for military cooperation," *News.az*, May 12, 2022.

(<https://news.az/news/azerbaijan-kazakhstan-discuss-prospects-for-military-cooperation>)

³⁴ Azad Garibov, "Azerbaijan, Georgia, Türkiye: Advancing the Military Dimension of the Trilateral Partnership," *L'Europe en Formation*, no. 1, 2018, pp. 37-44. (<https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-europe-en-formation-2018-1-page-37.htm>)

³⁵ Dana Omirgazy, "Kazakhstan, Türkiye to Bring Mutual Trade Turnover to \$10 Billion in Mid-Term," *Astana Times*, October 12, 2022. (<https://astanatimes.com/2022/10/kazakhstan-turkiye-to-bring-mutual-trade-turnover-to-10-billion-in-mid-term/>)

given that Türkiye is the second-largest military force in the Atlantic Alliance.

A Rising European Presence

The EU has recently taken a greater interest in Central Asia, with its relationship with Kazakhstan leading the way. Kazakhstan was the first regional country to sign an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU in December 2015.³⁶ It has also been far ahead of its neighbors in terms of engagement with Europe-based institutions like the Council of Europe, as well as the OECD. The EU developed an organized process for its interaction with Central Asia, involving bi-yearly Council Conclusions on Central Asia, as well as the launch of a new strategy in 2019, which came with growing financial muscles in terms of EU assistance to the region.³⁷

Kazakhstan also developed its relations with European powers by taking an active role in mediating the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014-15. While the Kazakh mediation efforts did not succeed, they did raise attention to Kazakhstan's in-

ternational agency and its contribution to regional peace and security – in particular with the French and German leaders that were involved in the Minsk negotiations over the conflict.³⁸ This laid the ground for a reappraisal of the relationship following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, after which the EU significantly raised its profile in Central Asia. Kazakh officials embarked on a diplomatic tour of European capitals in order to clarify Astana's position on the conflict – and in particular to reassure European partners that the January 2022 events in Kazakhstan had not changed the general outlook of Kazakhstan's foreign policy. Kazakh officials spoke to major European news outlets, making it clear that Kazakhstan did not “want to be placed in the same basket as Russia,”³⁹ and that it wanted to avoid being behind a new iron curtain, should one materialize.⁴⁰

European Union officials reciprocated by raising the level of their engagement with the region and with Kazakhstan specifically. The EU had had a High-Level Political and Security Dialogue with Central Asian states, but in October 2022, it met

³⁶ Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, “The EU and Kazakhstan: Developing a Partnership in Trade and Transport,” ISDP Policy Brief, December 22, 2015. (<https://isdpeu/publication/eu-kazakhstan-developing-partnership-trade-transport/>)

³⁷ Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, *Modernization and Regional Cooperation in Central Asia*, Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center, November 2018. (<https://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13320>)

³⁸ Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, *Kazakhstan's Role in International Mediation*, Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road

Studies Program Joint Center, November 2020. (<https://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13397>)

³⁹ Georgi Gotev, “Kazakh official: We will not risk being placed in the same basket as Russia,” *Euractiv*, March 29, 2022. (<https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/interview/kazakh-official-we-will-not-risk-being-placed-in-the-same-basket-as-russia/>)

⁴⁰ Philip Volkmann-Schluck, “Wie Putin Sein Sowjet-Trum Zerstört,” *Die Welt*, March 28, 2022. (<https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/plus237816257/Kasachstan-und-Russland-Wie-Putin-seinen-Sowjet-Traum-zerstoert.html>)

in Astana at the heads of state level for the first time, at Kazakhstan's initiative. Charles Michel, President of the European Council, again traveled to Central Asia in June 2023 for a second such meeting with his regional counterparts, where it was agreed that these meetings would be institutionalized as a formal EU-CA summit, implying the involvement of the European Commission and its entire bureaucracy.

On the bilateral front, Kazakhstani Prime Minister Alikhan Smailov and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in May 2023 signed a Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the field of raw materials, batteries and renewable hydrogen – an extension of the EU-Kazakhstan EPCA of 2015.⁴¹ Furthermore, Kazakhstan and the EU have initiated a dialogue on the facilitation of visa procedures for Kazakh citizens visiting the EU.⁴²

In addition, a visible increase of interest on the part of European countries for Kazakhstan and Central Asia has been visible. French President Macron in November 2022 received Presidents Tokayev and Mirziyoyev in Paris a week apart from each other, indicating France's interest in expanding its relations with the region. With Kazakhstan, Macron was explicit about the purpose of seeking to assist Kazakhstan in expanding its

international relationships. This was part of a broader French effort to increase French and European presence in the former Soviet Union, in which France seeks to boost the role of French business in the oil, gas, electricity, uranium and defense sectors. Paris is particularly interested in Kazakhstan's possible nuclear power station, in competition with Russian, Chinese and South Korean interests. Kazakhstan is already supplying almost half of the uranium used in France's nuclear energy production.

Macron reciprocated by visiting Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in early November 2023. This time, Macron was explicit about "the geopolitical difficulties, the pressures and sometimes the jostling to which you may be subjected."⁴³ As part of Macron's visit, French Total Eren and Kazakhstan's "Samruk-Kazyna" JSC and NC "KazMunayGas" JSC signed a joint venture agreement for the construction of wind power stations in Kazakhstan with a total capacity of one gigawatt. The wind power station is expected to be located in the Zhambyl Region in Southern Kazakhstan and is scheduled for commissioning in 2026-2027.

Other leading EU states have stepped up their involvement as well. In late September 2023, President Tokayev visited Berlin on a state visit, which

⁴¹ "EU-Kazakhstan Strategic Partnership Becomes Operational," European Commission, May 19, 2023. (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_2815)

⁴² "Kazakhstan and EU Start Streamlining Schengen Visa Process," *Astana Times*, October 6, 2023. (<https://astanatimes.com/2023/10/kazakhstan-and-eu-start-streamlining-schengen-visa-process/>)

⁴³ Mathilde Karsenti, "Contrats signés, radars militaires... Ce qui a été annoncé lors de la visite de Macron au Kazakhstan" *L'Express*, November 1, 2023. (<https://www.lexpress.fr/monde/asiе/contrats-signes-radars-militaires-ce-qui-a-ete-annonce-lors-de-la-visite-de-macron-au-kazakhstan-4UI5ZOBHZZDUBAUUYULDMHWKRP4/>)

was followed directly by the first Summit in the C5+Germany format. During the visit, Tokayev committed to increasing Kazakh oil supplies to Germany, while also agreeing to expand cooperation in critical raw materials for the ongoing energy transition. In addition, Berlin committed to support the development of the Middle Corridor transportation network linking Kazakhstan to Europe through the Caspian Sea.⁴⁴

The United States

The U.S.-Kazakhstan relationship has been the most stable and solid among America's relationships with Central Asian states, in contrast to relations with regional states like Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, which have been somewhat of a rollercoaster in the past two decades. The relationship was initially built on Kazakhstan's proactive approach dating to before its independence. The republic's leadership successfully sought investments from American multinational companies in the energy sector, and following the transition to independence also worked closely with the U.S. government on the removal of Soviet nuclear weapons from Kazakhstan's territory.⁴⁵ This brought connections to the West that few others in the region could rival.

While U.S. interactions with Kazakhstan and Central Asia have remained cordial, there was a visible downturn in U.S. engagement in the region from the mid-2000s to about 2015. Several factors contributed to this. One was the shifting attention of the U.S., as the troubles following the war in Iraq drew U.S. attention away from Central Asia. Related to this was the fact that U.S. relations with Central Asia came to be seen, for much of the U.S. government, mainly through the prism of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, another segment of the U.S. government and particularly the American commentariat saw the region almost exclusively through the prism of what came to be called the "Freedom Agenda" – the focus on human rights and democracy introduced following the re-election of President George W. Bush, which was pursued by the Obama administration as well.⁴⁶ As a result, by the mid-2010s a level of frustration had developed in the relationship. Kazakhstan, like other Central Asian states, felt that the U.S. was disengaging from the real security and economic problems of the region and instead saw the region through the prism of Afghanistan, while adopting a lecturing and often even hectoring approach to the issues relating to human rights and democracy in regional states.

⁴⁴ Marcin Popławski and Lidia Gibadło, "The 'Central Asian Five' in Berlin: time for a strategic partnership," Centre for Eastern Studies, October 5, 2023. (<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-10-05/central-asian-five-berlin-time-a-strategic-partnership>)

⁴⁵ See S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, *Strong and Unique: Three Decades of U.S.-Kazakhstan*

Partnership, Washington: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2022. (<https://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13428>)

⁴⁶ S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, *Long Game on the Silk Road*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

By 2010, however, in spite of these reservations, the U.S.-Kazakhstan relationship had developed to the extent that the countries launched annual bilateral consultations under their Strategic Partnership, a framework that allowed the two governments to consult and cooperate on a variety of matters including their bilateral relations and regional questions. Still, a U.S. regional approach was missing.

Hillary Clinton's announcement of the "New Silk Road" initiative in 2011 at first looked like it would provide U.S. engagement on a regional basis. But the initiative never received support from the White House, and was not picked up by her successor, John Kerry. Instead, Beijing appropriated the concept as it launched the "Silk Road Economic Belt" in Astana the very next year, which then turned into the BRI.

From 2015 onward, however, a gradual American re-engagement with the region has been visible, if sometimes tentative. A key point was the creation of the C5+1 mechanism for a recurrent and structured dialogue between the U.S. and the five Central Asian states. Interestingly, however, this was not created as a result of an American initiative. Kazakh Foreign Minister Erlan Idrissov made a case for it when visiting Washington and meeting with John Kerry in December 2014. The U.S. Government embraced the idea, and in September 2015 Secretary Kerry met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York with the Foreign Ministers of the five Central Asian states. At this meeting, they resolved to institute the new mechanism on a permanent basis.

In January 2018, President Trump hosted President Nazarbayev at the White House, in the first state visit between the two countries since Nazarbayev's visit to Washington twelve years earlier. This included a closed-door meeting between the two presidents, as well as a working luncheon and an extended meeting including cabinet members from both countries. This meeting led to the creation of an Enhanced Strategic Partnership Dialogue (ESPD) focused on political and security issues; trade and investment; and people-to-people relations. The two leaders took care to ensure this new format of interaction would not supersede the regional C5+1 mechanism. In fact, President Nazarbayev stated that he represented not only Kazakhstan but Central Asia, and the two leaders explicitly stated that they would continue to address shared challenges in Central Asia "through regional formats such as the C5+1 dialogue."

Washington announced a new formal strategy for Central Asia in early 2020, but this document was soon rendered largely irrelevant by the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Following that invasion, it took the U.S. over a year to reassess its posture on Central Asian affairs. By early 2023, greater momentum for U.S. engagement had built, not least as a result of the increasingly coordinated approaches taken by Central Asian governments. In March 2023, Secretary of State Antony Blinken traveled to Kazakhstan where he held bilateral talks as well as participated in the C5+1 foreign ministerial meeting in Astana, before traveling

on to Tashkent.⁴⁷ In the Summer, Central Asian ambassadors spoke publicly in Washington about the need for greater American engagement in the region.⁴⁸

Kazakh leaders also advanced several agenda points in the bilateral relationship. This included the strengthening of the C5+1 mechanism, which Kazakh and Central Asian diplomats have privately referred to as a “talking shop” rather than a results-oriented institution. To this effect, they have sought the creation of a secretariat for the C5+1 and a more results-oriented agenda to the meetings of the C5+1. They have also sought greater U.S. business involvement, and this helped bring a U.S. Chamber of Commerce business delegation to Kazakhstan in June 2023.

High on the list was also the fallout of the U.S. sanctions regime on Russia, which affected Kazakhstan and Kazakh businesses very hard given their exposure to Russia. Kazakhstan lobbied for carveouts from the sanctions, and succeeded in obtaining some, including a U.S. commitment not to target Kazakh banks for allowing the use of Russian “Mir” cards by private individuals.⁴⁹ But overall, there was little Kazakhstan could do to

avoid being caught in the middle. Intense coordination takes place to ensure that Kazakhstan does not run afoul of U.S. sanctions, but Astana has asked the U.S. government to take action to support U.S. investments in the country in order to mitigate the economic fallout. It has sought greater U.S. government involvement to mitigate the double taxation problems that inhibit business, and to finally lift the anachronistic Jackson-Vanik amendment of 1974, which proscribed normal trade relations with countries that restricted emigration – targeting particularly the USSR’s restrictions on Jewish emigration. In September 2023, a bill to repeal Jackson-Vanik for Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan was introduced in the U.S. Senate.⁵⁰

The greater U.S. involvement was illustrated in the first presidential level C5+1 summit in New York in September 2023. This discussion allowed Central Asian leaders to push for stronger U.S. commitment to the region. Whether this results in concrete U.S. steps to strengthen the security and welfare of Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states remains to be seen.

⁴⁷ “Blinken’s Central Asia Visit Raises Questions on US Role, Assistance”, Voanews, March 2, 2023. (<https://www.voanews.com/a/blinken-s-central-asia-visit-raises-questions-on-us-role-assistance-/6987471.html>)

⁴⁸ “Central Asia Diplomats Call for Closer Ties With US,” Voanews, June 25, 2023. (<https://www.voanews.com/a/central-asia-diplomats-call-for-closer-ties-with-us-/7150569.html>)

⁴⁹ “U.S. grants Kazakh banks permission to accept Russian migrants’ Mir payment cards,” meduza.io,

December 19, 2022.

(<https://meduza.io/en/news/2022/12/09/u-s-grants-kazakh-banks-permission-to-accept-russian-migrants-mir-payment-cards>)

⁵⁰ Catherine Putz, “Bipartisan Bill Seeks to Repeal Jackson-Vanik for Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan”, *Diplomat*, September 7, 2023. (<https://the-diplomat.com/2023/09/bipartisan-bill-seeks-to-repeal-jackson-vanik-for-kazakhstan-uzbekistan-and-tajikistan/>)

Staying the Course?

Kazakhstan's foreign policy doctrine of positive balance and a multivectoral approach is not a one-way street. Quite to the contrary, this approach depends on a "Buy-in" by other powers: if other powers are not willing to invest in the relationship and play their assigned role in Kazakhstan's multivectoral approach, it will not be possible for Astana to raise the level of its relationships with them in such a way that it effectively counterbalances Russia's dominant role in the region.

For some time, the rise of Russian pressure on Kazakhstan and Central Asia coupled with a sense of Western disengagement from the region led to legitimate concerns that Kazakhstan's approach would not prove workable in the long run. Recent years, however, have shown the opposite – and indicated that it is not only a workable model, but also as successful as can be expected given the delicate conditions Astana finds itself in. There are several key drivers behind this.

First, Kazakhstan's internal political dynamics have contributed significantly to making it a more attractive partner. Kazakhstan's American, European as well Chinese interlocutors have all stressed the importance of Kazakhstan's reform agenda in generating a dynamism that incentivizes them to further develop cooperation with the country. Obviously, Beijing and the West probably do so for different reasons. China sees the reforms mainly through an economic prism, but also as a factor strengthening Kazakhstan's stability. Kazakhstan's Western partners appear more focused on the political reforms and the

long-term effect in guiding the country to a more participatory political system.

Second, regional cooperation in Central Asia has played a significant role. It was always a tall order for a single landlocked state in Central Asia to gain systematic attention of outside powers. Kazakhstan did about as well as anyone could in this regard through its various initiatives. Once Central Asian leaders began to coordinate, and foreign powers could legitimately view Central Asia as a functioning world region, the calculus changed. It is against this background that one should understand the intensification of foreign powers' activity in the region, ranging from the U.S. and EU to Türkiye, India, Japan and the Gulf states. Kazakhstan has, in partnership with Uzbekistan, been the driving force in this cooperation, which has served to make the region more attractive and thus provide additional incentive for non-regional partners to take a greater role in Central Asian affairs.

Third, these non-regional powers have responded because they have viewed it to be in their own interest to do so. Undoubtedly, Western powers view the situation in Central Asia through a geopolitical lens, and are interested in preventing a Russian-Chinese domination of this crucial world region.

This is all well from Kazakhstan's perspective, as long as the rivalry between foreign powers can be managed. Therein lies a dilemma: a certain level of geopolitical rivalry is in Kazakhstan's interests, as it triggers a greater involvement of foreign powers that help the country assert its independence and provides more geopolitical "oxygen" for it to breathe, in a manner of speaking.

But should the rivalry intensify to a greater extent, that in turn risks overwhelming the regional states and reducing their agency, as it would tend to once again make Central Asia akin to a “chess-board” where the great powers see each other and not the regional states as their main counterparts. Unfortunately, the tension in world politics has reached such a degree that countries in Central Asia can do little to affect the pace of events.

In the interim, Kazakhstan can only continue along the path it committed itself to. To the extent that it can continue to balance relations with Russia with its ties to China, and attract the interest of a multitude of non-regional power, its prospects for continuing to assert sovereignty in a

vulnerable geopolitical environment are positive. There is much Kazakh leaders can themselves do to further his goal – not least continue to deepen the internal reforms that will make the country more resilient to external and transnational threats, particularly if it succeeds in conducting major reform of its security structures. But its success, and that of the region, will continue to depend on outside powers supporting the strategy of positive balance that President Tokayev presented twenty-six years ago.

Svante E. Cornell is Director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center.

