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# **KAZAKHSTAN'S EFFORTS WITH RUSSIA AND CHINA**

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Kazakhstan is a landlocked state that shares borders with Russia to the north and northwest, China to the southeast, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to the south, and the Caspian Sea to the southwest. It is located in Central Asia and is the largest country in the area, as well as the ninth largest country in the world. With a GDP of 225.3 billion USD, Kazakhstan is the largest economy in Central Asia. Kazakhstan's biggest outgoing product is crude petroleum, making up about 48% of its exports<sup>1</sup>, with the country having the largest proven oil reserves in the Caspian Sea. The former Soviet Republic is also the largest exporter of uranium in the world, with an export value of about 2.6 billion USD.<sup>2</sup>

Kazakhstan has a presidential system of government where the president holds most of the power. The country has an abysmally low freedom rating of 23 (out of 100) according to Freedom House.<sup>3</sup> The low score is due to the regime of Nursultan Nazarbayev, who was the president of Kazakhstan from its independence in 1990 up to 2019. Although the constitution of Kazakhstan now does not allow the president to stay in power for more than two consecutive five-year terms, under Nazarbayev's rule, the constitution was amended several times to keep him in power for almost 30 years.<sup>4</sup> Even after his resignation in 2019, he continued to hold a veto over political appointments while also naming himself the chairman-for-life for the country's security council.<sup>5</sup> The current president of the country, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, has made efforts towards increasing democratic freedom in the country, including ending Nazarbayev's stint as chairman of the Security Council and taking the position in his stead. Tokayev has also made reforms to the

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<sup>1</sup> "Kazakhstan Profile." 2022. OEC. 2022. Accessed April 17, 2024. <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/kaz> .

<sup>2</sup> "Uranium Exporting Countries Based on Value 2022 | Statista." 2023. Statista. October 30, 2023. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1143422/leading-uranium-exporting-countries-based-on-value-worldwide/> .

<sup>3</sup> Freedom House. n.d. "Kazakhstan." Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kazakhstan/freedom-world/2021> .

<sup>4</sup> "Background on Nursultan Nazarbayev." 2012. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. March 26, 2012. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/03/26/background-on-nursultan-nazarbayev-pub-47648> .

<sup>5</sup> Lillis, Joanna. 2019. "Who Really Is Kazakhstan's Leader of the Nation?" Eurasianet. October 25, 2019. <https://eurasianet.org/who-really-is-kazakhstans-leader-of-the-nation> .

parliament to strengthen it.<sup>6</sup> While the reforms have worked towards preventing further autocracy, Kazakhstan is still far from a liberal democracy.

## Kazakhstan and Russia: A Historical Partnership from Soviet Times

Before its dissolution in the 1990's, the Soviet Union, or the USSR, was the world's largest country, being made up of several European and Central Asian states. One of these states was Kazakhstan. The Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (Kazakh SSR) was the second largest republic in Soviet territory, only behind the Russian Republic. The Kazakh SSR played a key role in the Second World War, entering the war as soon as Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. More than a million Kazakhstanis were called up to fight for the USSR in the Red Army, with about six hundred thousand being martyred. Kazakhstan also served as a manufacturer of lead amongst other military materials, with the Kazakh president saying most Soviet bullets were made with lead produced in Kazakhstan.<sup>7</sup> In 1954, Kazakhstan was also the site at which Khrushchev's *Virgin Land Proposal* took place.<sup>8</sup> Khrushchev, in a speech in 1954, had said that the Soviet government needed to increase their acquisition of food and planned to achieve this by ploughing up unused land in a few provinces under the USSR territory. Most of these provinces were in Kazakhstan, with the country providing more than half of the area to be ploughed up and sown. The project caused unprecedented growth in the measure of area cultivated by the USSR, seeing the agricultural output of the country by 50%.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Institute for Security and Development Policy. 2022. "Political and Economic Reforms in Kazakhstan Under President Tokayev - Institute for Security and Development Policy." May 3, 2022. <https://isdps.org/publication/political-and-economic-reforms-in-kazakhstan-under-president-tokayev/>.

<sup>7</sup> "Kazakhstan's contribution to victory in the Great Patriotic War." n.d. Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan to Ethiopia. Accessed April 17, 2024. <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa-addis-ababa/press/events/details/2119?lang=en>.

<sup>8</sup> Mills, Richard M. "The Formation of the Virgin Lands Policy." *Slavic Review* 29, no. 1 (1970): 58–69. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2493090>.

<sup>9</sup> Durgin, Frank A. "The Virgin Lands Programme 1954-1960." *Soviet Studies* 13, no. 3 (1962): 255–80. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/149136>.

## Post-Soviet relations

Kazakhstan gained independence on December 16, 1991, becoming the last Soviet Republic to do so after the USSR's collapse. The Central Asian nation was also one of very few nations to voluntarily give up the nuclear arsenal they had inherited from the USSR, surrendering all its warheads to Russia.<sup>10</sup> Kazakhstan, after its independence, like other former Soviet Central Asian republics, has adopted a flexible approach in its foreign policy, conducting its business with other nations through a pragmatic lens.<sup>11</sup> Regardless of the *multi-vector* approach of Kazakhs, their closest defence ties exist with Russia. Kazakhstan is a part of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), both created in part by Russia. Additionally, it is also a part of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which was created by Russia, along with Ukraine and Belarus. While Kazakhstan tried to increase cooperation with the West and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) to diversify its relations in a post-9/11 world, it did not change the fact that most of the Kazakh military was made up of Russian equipment. This created an inherent dependency on Russia because of the need to focus on upgrading current equipment with the help of Russia or buying from them at preferential prices. Kazakhstan preferred this as it would be cheaper than getting newer, more expensive equipment from NATO while having a military that the country could already only barely maintain.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Sanchez, Wilder Alejandro. 2021. "The Lasting Repercussions of Kazakhstan's Nuclear Disarmament." E-International Relations. November 17, 2021. <https://www.e-ir.info/2021/11/17/the-lasting-repercussions-of-kazakhstans-nuclear-disarmament/>.

<sup>11</sup> Wahlang, Jason. n.d. "Kazakhstan's 'Multi-Vector' Foreign Policy Amidst the Ukraine War | Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses." <https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/kazakhstans-foreign-policy-ukraine-war-jwahlang-270423>.

<sup>12</sup> Sanchez, Wilder Alejandro. 2021. "The Lasting Repercussions of Kazakhstan's Nuclear Disarmament." E-International Relations. November 17, 2021. <https://www.e-ir.info/2021/11/17/the-lasting-repercussions-of-kazakhstans-nuclear-disarmament/>.

<sup>12</sup> Wahlang, Jason. n.d. "Kazakhstan's 'Multi-Vector' Foreign Policy Amidst the Ukraine War | Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses." <https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/kazakhstans-foreign-policy-ukraine-war-jwahlang-270423>.

<sup>12</sup> McDermott, Roger N. "KAZAKHSTAN'S DEFENSE POLICY: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE TRENDS." Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2009. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11473>.

In the CSTO, Russia and Kazakhstan are the two biggest and most active members, with the Kazakhs taking part in all military exercises conducted by the organisation. Kazakhstan has also participated in military exercises with Russia, among other Central Asian and Asian states, under the *Tsentr* series. Being one of the leading contributors of the CSTO, Kazakhstan has assigned its 37<sup>th</sup> Air-Assault Brigade to the CSTO's Collective Rapid Reaction Forces (CRRF).<sup>13</sup> Russia also has access to several of its most important, formerly Soviet, military and research facilities in Kazakhstan, along with access to several firing ranges across the country. This was granted to Russia following an agreement on the training of the Kazakh military and specialised maintenance of their equipment in return.

## The Cosmodrome

Russia rents from Kazakhstan, the Baikonur Cosmodrome, which remains the largest spaceport in the world. Kazakhstan inherited the cosmodrome from the USSR, but due to several restrictions, could not make full use of it to create their own space program. This led to the long-term leasing of the cosmodrome to Russia for its own space program, handled by Roscomsos.<sup>14</sup> Russia's lease lasts till 2050, and it has built alternate spaceports at Vostochny, which is expected to take over from the Baikonur as the lease comes to a close. In 2018, Russia and Kazakhstan reached an agreement that gave the Kazakhs control over two Zenit-M Launch pads in Baikonur, along with the responsibility to create ground infrastructure and to modernise them for the launch of Soyuz-5 capsules developed by Russia.<sup>15</sup> Control of launchpads in the world's biggest spaceport may seem like a step forward for the Kazakhstan Space Program, but Russia's control over the rest of the spaceport doesn't allow Kazakhstan to use these autonomously. Instead, it increases the Kazakh

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<sup>13</sup> Gelfgat, Vitaly. "Central Asian States: Matching Military Means to Strategic Ends." *Connections* 13, no. 3 (2014): 1–20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26326365> .

<sup>14</sup> Chukalova, Ramilya, Zarina Kakenova, Almagul Kushpaeva, Amirzhan Alpeisov, and Galina Kakenova. 2018. "The Role of Baikonur in the Context of Military-political Cooperation Between Kazakhstan and Russia." 2018. <https://www.redalyc.org/journal/310/31055914025/html/> .

<sup>15</sup> Savostyanov, Sergei. 2018. "Russia, Kazakhstan Complete Handover of Zenit-M Launch Facility at Baikonur." TASS, October 3, 2018. <https://tass.com/science/1024059> .

dependency on the Russians, as the Soyuz-5 capsules, which are meant to be launched from the Zenit-M sites, will entirely be Russian.

## Kazakhstan and China: A Blend of Trade and Strategic Partnerships

When compared with its ties to Russia through the erstwhile Soviet Union, Kazakhstan's relations with China are quite recent. The recency of these ties is due to the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC). The relations did not take a long time to develop, with China being the Central Asian country's largest trade partner. The countries have also engaged in several security and economic activities through the SCO led by China and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), of which Kazakhstan is an integral part, being called its buckle at times. One of the major Chinese interests in Kazakhstan is energy trade and natural reserves, which the country has. In 2007, the two countries had talks on the extension of a Kazakh-China gas pipeline further to the west, linking Beijing to the Caspian Sea, which houses major gas reserves. In 2009, Kazakhstan and China held talks over constructing a gas pipeline through Kazakhstan to transport gas from Turkmenistan, aiming to reduce Kazakhstan's dependence on Russian gas.

### Belt and Road Initiative

China's ambitious BRI aims to connect China with the rest of the world through a land route as an alternate to the Malacca Strait. It was first announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping during a visit to Kazakhstan, and he considers it to be the key to its success. Kazakhstan's vast landmass and access to the Caspian Sea, along with its considerable stability when compared to other Central Asian States, make it a prime candidate to be made a key piece in the BRI.<sup>16</sup> Kazakhstan's enthusiasm to be a centrepiece in the BRI is quite understandable due to the substantial economic

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<sup>16</sup> Saltybayev, Yerzhan. "BRI and Kazakhstan: Challenges and Outlooks of China's Grand Strategy in Central Asia." *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 10 (2018): 76–85. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48573478>.

upgrades it can offer to the country. Being a transit link for one of the largest trade routes in the world will allow the country to develop deeper trade relations with those who are connected through the route. Kazakhstan, being a land-locked country, will obtain connectivity that could earlier be accessed only through sea routes. The infrastructure development also offers a lot of help in developing the GDP of the nation, reducing its dependency on the export of energy.<sup>17</sup> It also makes the country a centrepiece in one of the most ambitious trade projects in the world, offering it opportunities to leverage this position in future negotiations with powers much bigger than itself.

## Security Collaborations

While most of China's interactions with Kazakhstan maintain an economic undertone, there also exist security issues on which the two countries collaborate on. One of the most prominent issues that China combines with Kazakhstan, amongst other Central Asian states, is the separatist movement propagated by the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in the Xinjiang province of China. The Xinjiang autonomous region is the border Kazakhstan shares with China and is populated mostly by Uyghur Muslims, who make up most of the ETIM's ranks. Kazakhstan also has a large population of Uyghurs who sympathise with the separatist cause of the ETIM. Kazakhstan, along with other Central Asian states, has worked to reduce the voice of the Uyghurs within their borders, also deporting them to China, in return for security personnel training, sensitive data on suspected terrorists, and equipment.<sup>18</sup> China, through the SCO, also conducted the Tianshan Mountain No. 1 counter-terrorism exercise with Kazakhstan bilaterally, further deepening the ties between the two countries. Kazakhstan was also a part of several other multilateral counter-terrorism exercises headed by China in its bid to quench Islamic radicalism in

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<sup>17</sup> "South Caucasus and Central Asia: The Belt and Road Initiative Kazakhstan Country Case Study." 2020. The World Bank. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/471731593499938164/pdf/South-Caucasus-and-Central-Asia-The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-Kazakhstan-Country-Case-Study.pdf> .

<sup>18</sup> Vishnevskaya-Mann, Anastasia. 2018. "Providing Security along the Silk Road: Bridging the Russian and Chinese Security Concerns in Central Asia." *L'Europe En Formation* Volume 385 (Issue 1): 131–42. [https://www.cairn-int.info/article.php?ID\\_ARTICLE=E\\_EUFOR\\_385\\_0131](https://www.cairn-int.info/article.php?ID_ARTICLE=E_EUFOR_385_0131) .



its region.<sup>19</sup> This leaves a sour taste in the mouths of the Uyghur population in Kazakhstan itself. Further collaboration with China about the same would propagate feelings of betrayal amongst this population, which could further cause security concerns for the country.

## A Shift in Dependence?

Kazakhstan's turn away from its Russian dependence could be observed in its post-9/11 efforts to increase interactions with the West and NATO, but they were brought to the front when Russia invaded Ukraine. While concerns arose in the West about Kazakhstan moving closer to Russia, the Kazakh response has been reassuring. Officials in Astana have stated that the country does not wish to be on the wrong side of another iron curtain.<sup>20</sup> Kazakhstan also abstained from voting when discussing major UN General Assembly resolutions on Russia. Kazakhstan's abstention is a distinct lack of support for Russia's actions while also trying to preserve its bilateral relations with the country on which it depends so heavily upon.<sup>21</sup> While Kazakhstan's actions drew a lot of criticism from Russian media and parliament alike, the two countries were very careful at not letting it affect their relationship. In 2023, at a press conference held after Kazakhstan President Tokayev's routine talk with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, he addressed those gathered there in his native Kazakh rather than the usual Russian.<sup>22</sup> While it may seem miniscule, this only points at Kazakhstan's efforts to escape the Russian shadow and reduce its dependency on the country. However, the country's significant dependence on Russia was underscored during the 2022 civil protests, when the country officially requested assistance from the CSTO to quell riots

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<sup>19</sup> Wang, Jin, and Dehang Kong. 2019. "Counter-Terrorism Cooperation Between China and Central Asian States in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization." *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 05 (01): 65–79. <https://doi.org/10.1142/s237740019500027> .

<sup>20</sup> Sheahan, Maria. 2022. "Kazakhstan does not want to be behind new iron curtain, deputy minister says." Reuters, March 28, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/kazakhstan-does-not-want-be-behind-new-iron-curtain-deputy-minister-2022-03-28/> .

<sup>21</sup> Dumoulin, Marie. 2023. "Steppe change: How Russia's war on Ukraine is reshaping Kazakhstan." ECFR. April 13, 2023. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/steppe-change-how-russias-war-on-ukraine-is-reshaping-kazakhstan/#a-major-geopolitical-shock> .

<sup>22</sup> Burke, Justin. 2023. "Kazakh President Uses Language to Deliver a Surprising Message to Russia." Eurasianet. November 12, 2023. <https://eurasianet.org/kazakh-president-uses-language-to-deliver-a-surprising-message-to-russia> .

that began over fuel price hikes and escalated from there. Moscow sent most of the relief forces, controlling the riots. Russian intervention helped bring order back to the country and is also what kept Tokayev as president, even after such violent protests.

Kazakhstan's efforts to reduce Russia's influence, however, seem to have chased into the arms of China, a country whose influence is not desired in the country by the citizens. A majority of Kazakhstan citizens have negative feelings about the BRI spearheaded by China, while the majority also think that there currently is or in the future will be a threat of an increasing influence of China on Kazakhstan.<sup>23</sup> China has also created for itself a bad image for the large Uyghur population in Kazakhstan. There have been several protests within Kazakhstan against China's detention of Uyghur Muslims<sup>24</sup> within concentration camps, asking for the release of these detainees, who more often than not are family members of Kazakh Uyghurs. Kazakhstan has also been criticised over its compliance with China's treatment of Uyghurs under the guise of anti-terrorist actions against the ETIM. Kazakhstan's compliance with China's may be seen by some as a worrisome shift from the umbrella of one country to another.

## Conclusion

Kazakhstan's previously mentioned multi-vectoral style of diplomacy and foreign policy is quite visible across its interactions with China and Russia, as well as the West at times, as it tries to gain the favour of all powers. It is obvious that Russia still remains a huge part of the Kazakh foreign policy from the perspective of security, as it provides the country with preferential prices and is the origin place of most of the Kazakhstan military's equipment. However, one cannot undermine the speed at which China has developed relations with most of Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan, becoming its largest trade partner over Russia. The two countries are currently the

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<sup>23</sup> Corre, Philippe Le. 2019. "Kazakhs Wary of Chinese Embrace as BRI Gathers Steam." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. February 28, 2019. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/28/kazakhs-wary-of-chinese-embrace-as-bri-gathers-steam-pub-78545> .

<sup>24</sup> Lakhanuly, Nurtai. 2021. "Almaty Police Detain Demonstrators Demanding Relatives' Release From Detention in China's Xinjiang." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, November 29, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-xinjiang-uyghurs-protests/31584876.html> .

most influential in Kazakhstan. As Kazakhstan made efforts to get out of Russia's sphere of influence, it has found itself embroiled with China. While the BRI possesses many advantages for Kazakhstan, its implementation would almost guarantee a greater influence for China over Kazakhstan's trade.

Kazakhstan's game of balance right now finds itself in a very precarious situation, with a security dependence on Russia and now a newer evolving economic relation with China, which might lead to inroads for China, which Kazakhstan would not prefer. As an increase in China's influence is seen as almost inevitable by a majority of the Kazakh population and a military existence outside of Russia starts seeming like a pipe dream, it is now up to the government to use its multi-vector approach to find a way out of this cul-de-sac, lest the country find itself in the traps of yet another situation where it becomes a subordinate to a larger power in the region.