

## Kazakhstan-Russia Relations in the Wake of the January Unrest

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and tactics. NATO special forces could accompany Ukrainian forces for the purpose of collecting intelligence. NATO should plan for the medium term by storing military and medical supplies in Poland, Slovakia, and Romania—three of the four NATO member states bordering Ukraine—with the goal of organising a supply route into Western Ukraine, a region that is unlikely to be occupied by Russia. In the event of a Russian occupation, NATO special forces should become more directly involved in planning and possibly participating in a covert manner in launching attacks on Russian forces.

Ninth, NATO should increase its supply to the Ukrainian armed forces of lethal military equipment, especially military equipment that can be used to destroy Russian air force planes, helicopters, and incoming missiles. Secondly, NATO should provide upfront and advance intelligence on Russian military movements.

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#### ANALYSIS

## Kazakhstan–Russia Relations in the Wake of the January Unrest

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### Abstract

Putin's Russia appeared to gain the greatest benefits from Kazakhstan's Bloody January. Contrary to claims that the Kremlin's influence in the republic is growing, I show how Russia's relatively weak economic standing, coupled with Kazakhstan's changing attitudes, will seriously limit Russia's ability to increase its geopolitical influence over Kazakhstan.

### Russia's Troop Deployment

The deployment of Russia-led CSTO troops to Kazakhstan in January 2022 to protect key strategic facilities threatened by the violent unrest and standoff with the loyalists of former President Nursultan Nazarbayev triggered a tide of commentaries about the future of Russia in Central Asia and Moscow's relations with Kazakhstan. According to many observers, not only has the swift military expedition changed assessments of the CSTO, which was once dismissed as a symbolic alliance, but it has also helped the Kremlin to strengthen

Tenth, Russian information warfare and media outlets such as RT should be closed in every NATO and EU member state. YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter should ban Russian disinformation outlets.

The fate of the democratic West is being decided in Ukraine. If the West were to allow Ukraine to be occupied and transformed into a Russian satellite state resembling Belarus, it would be the beginning of the end for NATO and the EU. Revisionist powers such as China and Iran would see this as a signal that the West was in decline. The threat to Taiwan and the three Baltic states would grow.

The West cannot allow Russia to destroy Ukraine's sovereignty and democracy. Ukrainians made their choice to live in an independent state three decades ago and have given thousands of lives in two revolutions and since 2014 to join the ranks of the democratic world.

its influence in the post-Soviet space and secure the loyalty of Kazakhstan's leadership to Russia. Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's first foreign trip to Moscow following the January 2022 unrest seemed to support these accounts. During the February 2022 Russia–Kazakhstan talks, President Tokayev thanked President Vladimir Putin and other CSTO partners for their support and stressed that the two countries would expand and deepen their bilateral cooperation.

The argument that Tokayev's government will lose its political and economic autonomy to Moscow is mis-

guided. Kazakhstan will not become the Kremlin's geopolitical pawn. The health of Kazakhstan's economy, whose structural deficiencies precipitated the January 2022 protests, hinges on foreign investments, with the bulk of foreign capital coming from Western countries and China. While the Russian energy companies may gain from a new investment policy announced by President Tokayev, as well as from the re-launch of the nuclear industry in Kazakhstan, Moscow's lack of free-floating cash and sweeping economic sanctions imposed by the Western countries will obviate any changes to the balance of investments in Astana. Russia may retain its position as Kazakhstan's primary trade partner, but its ability to control Astana's commerce through the Eurasian Economic Union's (EAEU) regulations will be limited by Moscow's own economic dependence on China.

In the security realm, Kazakhstan's robust defense and military cooperation with Moscow will be sustained, but deeper political integration with Moscow will not be forthcoming. The loss of autonomy to the former colonial "master" will be a political liability for the Tokayev regime as it seeks to build legitimacy in the eyes of the Kazakh population. The leadership of Kazakhstan will therefore continue Nazarbayev's strategy of making tactical concessions to Moscow while offsetting Russia's influence by means of different balancing measures in the economic and security realms.

### Russia in Kazakhstan's Economy

In the first two decades following its independence, Kazakhstan saw spectacular economic growth. Its vast hydrocarbon resources and mineral wealth, relative political stability, and ambitious structural reforms made the republic an attractive target for foreign investments. The influx of petroleum dollars, coupled with the government's effort to educate and train the country's managers, engineers, and bureaucrats, helped to resuscitate its energy, manufacturing, and service sectors, propelling Kazakhstan to the status of an upper-middle-income economy. Despite some attempts to diversify domestic production in Kazakhstan by targeting the food processing, telecommunications, petrochemicals, and pharmaceuticals sectors, the country's economic growth was due to the extraction and sale of fossil fuels, with nearly 60 percent of the state budget coming from oil revenues. This made Kazakhstan's economy susceptible to fluctuations in the crude oil price and shocks in the global financial markets.

The 2007–2009 global financial crisis, the oil price plunge in 2014–2016, and the collapse of Russia's economy as a result of Western sanctions revealed serious structural deficiencies in Kazakhstan's economy. Since 2014, Astana's economic growth has slowed, inequality has risen, and corruption has become further

entrenched. Some analysts speculate that the ailing economy—once a source of pride and legitimacy for Nursultan Nazarbayev—led to the first Kazakh president's resignation. The "anointed" successor to Nazarbayev, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, assumed the presidency in 2019 through a managed political succession. Tokayev's presidency was met with rising public discontent over growing wealth disparities, poor labor conditions, salary arrears, and environmental concerns. These were exacerbated by the pandemic, which highlighted the perennial underfunding, ineffectiveness, and corruption of the health system.

The immediate economic challenge facing the Tokayev government is to pull the country out of its economic slump. Foreign investments have been the main catalyst of Kazakhstan's growth, with the largest share of foreign investments having come from the West. As of 2022, more than 700 US companies were operating in Kazakhstan. Between 2005 and 2020, Kazakhstan's cumulative energy investments were \$161 billion, of which \$30 billion came from the US, making the latter among Kazakhstan's top three investors. Chinese investments likewise soared even before the advent of Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By the end of 2019, Beijing had invested \$29.66 billion in various sectors of Kazakhstan's economy. Some 56 China-backed projects worth nearly \$24.5 billion are slated to be completed by 2023. Kazakhstan has given extensive hydrocarbon exploration and mining rights to Chinese companies. The construction of the China–Central Asia gas pipeline allowed the republic to diversify its infrastructural links, which had previously been monopolized by Russia.

While Russia remains Kazakhstan's main trading partner, due in large part to the structure of Astana's imports, which are shaped by its EAEU membership (see Figures 1 on p. 12 & 2 on p. 13), China has supplanted it as a top export destination. Russia's investments, which constituted between 3 and 6 percent of total FDI in Kazakhstan pale in comparison to Western and Chinese foreign capital. Moscow's limited economic leverage over Kazakhstan stems from the EAEU, which binds its members to the operating rules of the customs union. Russia has pressured Kazakhstan to consent to the harmonized oil and gas standards within the EAEU, which might allow Moscow to dictate fuel prices for exports to China. These mechanisms could also be used to divert China's gas imports from Kazakhstan to Russia. Under current agreements, however, trade will remain exempt from tariff harmonization until 2024, and Moscow promised, in a joint declaration with China signed in 2015, to coordinate economic integration within the EAEU with the BRI projects.

The area where Moscow's economic clout may increase in the future is nuclear energy generation.

Increased demand for electricity, coupled with the crumbling coal plant infrastructure and failing energy grid, have resulted in energy deficits and outages across Central Asia. Hailing the republic's commitment to achieving carbon neutrality by 2060, the Tokayev government has moved to revitalize the nuclear energy sector in Kazakhstan. Russia's Rosatom will train the republic's nuclear power engineers and may build the first nuclear plant in Kazakhstan. If implemented, the nuclear energy project will entail minor changes to the national accounts of Kazakhstan. The Tokayev government is well aware that the country needs Western investments for its economic growth. Any shift in its geo-economic orientation will be detrimental to economic stability in Kazakhstan.

### **Kazakhstan's Security Cooperation with Moscow**

In the defense, security, and military sectors, Kazakhstan has maintained its strongest ties to Russia, and this is unlikely to change. Long before the January 2022 events, Moscow and Astana inked a new bilateral military cooperation agreement that replaced an outdated 1994 deal. Signed by the Russian and Kazakh defense ministers in October 2020 and ratified by the countries' parliaments in 2021, the new agreement formalized the multi-faceted defense, military, and security cooperation that involves nearly every aspect of their security policies and related activities: joint military exercises within the CSTO and SCO frameworks, the production and sales of military weapons and technology, professional military education and training, the sharing of military facilities and installations, and sending peacekeeping troops for UN-led missions. Russia's influence on the region's security has been seen favorably by Beijing. Russia's stabilizing measures help protect Chinese investments and its security posture in the region reinforces defense and military cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, including through joint CSTO-SCO exercises and training.

While close security and military ties with Moscow remain in Kazakhstan's interests, its government has also endeavored to diversify its strategic partners and resisted Moscow's attempt at greater political integration using security and economic cooperation as a springboard. In 1994, the same year that Kazakhstan signed its first military cooperation agreement with Moscow, it joined the NATO Partnership for Peace Program; it has collaborated in the areas of counter-terrorism and emergency response through the Kazakhstan–NATO Individual Partnership Action Plan since 2006. Under this program, Kazakhstan has hosted the annual Steppe Eagle military exercises with NATO and regional partners sponsored by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff and carried out by the U.S. Central Command. Washington

has maintained robust security cooperation with Astana and discussions are underway to extend it through 2027. Kazakhstan has also maintained security cooperation with other NATO members. In October 2021, it signed a plan for cooperation in peacekeeping, military training, and naval affairs with Italy, and agreed to buy offensive drones from Ankara.

There is little indication that the Tokayev government will cut its strategic ties with its Western partners, notwithstanding Russian diplomats' suggestions to the contrary. Kazakhstan has not accused the West of stirring up the January unrest, a narrative professed by Russia. Moreover, President Tokayev was quick to declare the CSTO mission complete. These moves reflect the Kazakh government's understanding that getting too close to Russia and cutting its ties with the West risks upsetting the people. This is something Tokayev would not risk, given that he needs to win public support and legitimize his rule in the eyes of the general population.

### **Public Opinion and the Future of Kazakhstan–Russia Relations**

For the first two years of his presidency, Tokayev operated in the shadows of the first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev. The duumvirate government arrangement made it difficult to separate the accomplishments (and failures) of the Nazarbayev government from those of his successor. As a consequence, when Tokayev emerged as solo leader of Kazakhstan he could claim little political capital and legitimacy independent from the legacy of the "Father of the Nation." This lack of popular legitimacy, in turn, has made Tokayev more vulnerable to sentiments, opinions, and attitudes in the broader population.

The majority of Kazakhstanis continue to hold a positive opinion of Russia. According to the Central Asia Barometer, 87 percent have a favorable view of Moscow and 88 percent support closer relations with their northern neighbor. Yet these positive views are neither extreme nor exclusive of positive attitudes toward other countries; they are also constantly changing. Younger Kazakhstanis are less likely to identify as Russophiles. The growing number of Muslim voices are furious about the clout of the Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan, while the nationalist groups have been pushing against Russia-centric curricula in public education. Kazakhstani society consists of more ethnic Kazakhs than Russians and the Russian language has been gradually supplanted as a lingua franca in Kazakhstan. All in all, national consciousness and identification with national interests has become a stronger vector in Kazakhstan's foreign relations with Russia. While a sense of shared historical experiences and perceptions of Russia's modern-day accomplishments at home drive the positive attitudes

of Kazakhstanis toward Moscow, the Kremlin’s aggressive adventurism in Ukraine, Putin’s assertions about the malleability of the Soviet borders, and the consequences of sanctions on Moscow will alter these assessments, incentivizing Kazakhstan’s citizens to pressure their government to keep its distance from Russia.

**Conclusion**

By relying on CSTO intervention for regime reinforcement, President Tokayev has fallen into Moscow’s power grip, according to many analysts. Yet Kazakhstan’s economic imperatives, elites’ orientation, and public sentiment present serious obstacles to the country’s further drift into the Russian orbit of influence. While the prospect of the deployment of Russia-led troops in support

of the regime might deter future palace coups, prevent defections among the security forces, and limit the success of mass demonstrations, it will not suffice to offset the strategic balance of economic and security interests that has been built in Kazakhstan to date.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine will have serious consequences for Moscow, limiting its ability to project security and economic influence in Kazakhstan in the future. In a first clear sign of distancing its government from the Putin regime, the Tokayev cabinet turned down a request for Kazakhstani troops to join the Russian offensive in Ukraine. Additionally, Kazakhstan refused to recognize the Russia-backed statelets in Ukraine’s Donbass region.

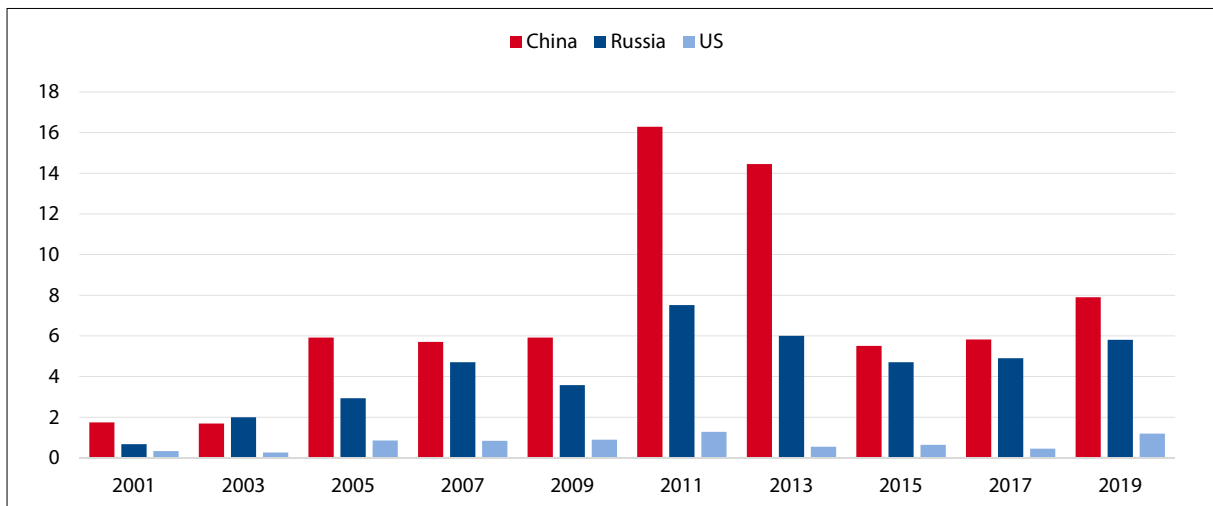
*About the Author*

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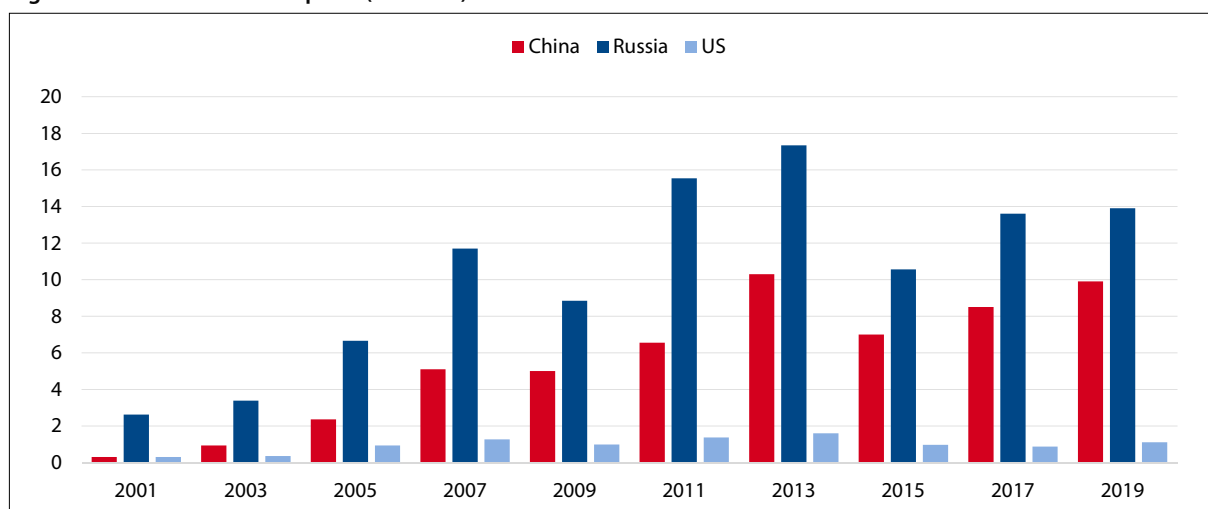
**Figure 1: Kazakhstan’s Exports (bln. USD)**



Year	China	Russia	US
2001	1.74	0.67	0.33
2003	1.68	1.99	0.26
2005	5.91	2.93	0.85
2007	5.7	4.7	0.83
2009	5.91	3.57	0.89
2011	16.28	7.51	1.27
2013	14.45	6	0.54
2015	5.5	4.7	0.64
2017	5.82	4.9	0.45
2019	7.9	5.8	1.19

Source: <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/usa#latest-data>

Figure 2: Kazakhstan's Imports (bln. USD)



Year	China	Russia	US
2001	0.3	2.62	0.3
2003	0.93	3.38	0.36
2005	2.36	6.66	0.93
2007	5.1	11.7	1.27
2009	5	8.84	0.99
2011	6.55	15.54	1.37
2013	10.3	17.34	1.6
2015	7	10.56	0.97
2017	8.5	13.6	0.869
2019	9.9	13.9	1.11

Source: <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/usa#latest-data>