



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



DPG POLICY BRIEF

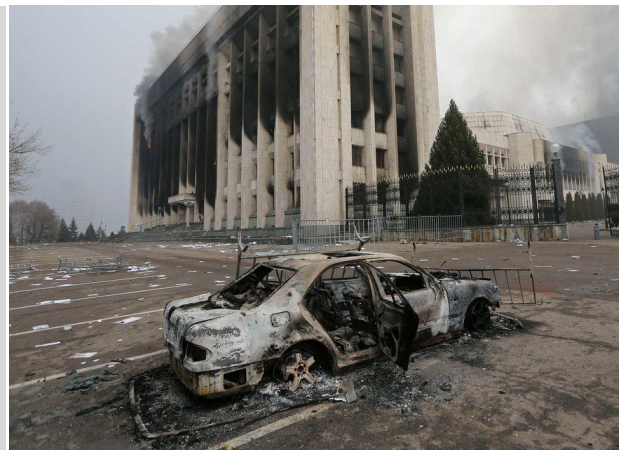
Turmoil in Kazakhstan

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Cover Photographs:

The Mayor's office building after it was stormed by violent protestors in Almaty, Kazakhstan, January 6, 2022.

Source: Reuters

Russian President Vladimir Putin attending a virtual emergency meeting of the Council of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) at the Novo-Ogaryovo state residence, January 10, 2022.

Source: President of Russia, Official Website

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Turmoil in Kazakhstan

by

Phunchok Stobdan

I. Trouble in the Eurasian heartland: Central Asia's largest nation Kazakhstan is pushed to the brink

It is unusual for any Central Asian country to hog international headlines. The region has largely remained quiescent. But a week of unrest in Kazakhstan since the start of the year has caught everyone off-guard.

The crisis was triggered by a protest over a sudden spike in the price of fuel in the western oil town of Zhanaozen and spread rapidly to other parts of the country, which descended into chaos. The old capital Almaty became a war zone of gutted buildings, burnt cars, and the dead.

To those who are not familiar with Central Asia, Kazakhstan's territory is the size of India's with a population (19 million) less than that of Delhi, and is the richest and largest country in the heart of Asia. It is a major global oil and gas exporter and sits atop colossal reserves of oil, natural gas, uranium, and precious metals. Kazakhstan is a mainly Muslim nation, with a large Russian minority. It has been the most stable and prosperous among its neighbours and has had no major civil strife since it gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

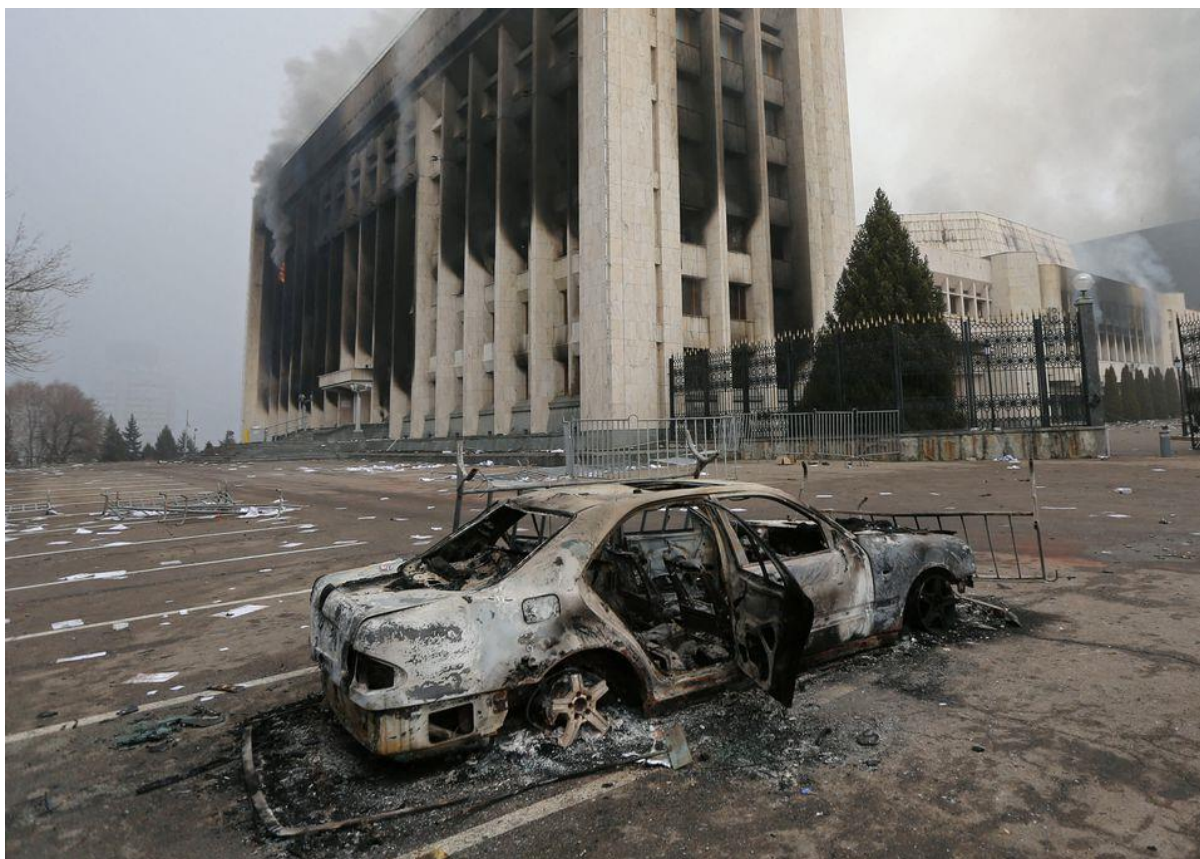
The Crisis

The demonstrations initially began as a response to a fuel price hike. It has been widely reported that the crisis came on the back of long-festering grievances about economic inequality. The country's economic wealth from oil exports has not trickled down to segments of the population. The widening rich-poor gap and urban-rural divide have been a source of concern. It seems that public unrest was accentuated by a pandemic-induced recession (-2.6 percent) in 2020.

The crisis may have erupted over an economic issue but it soon took a political overtone and swelled into a broad movement. The protesters initially demanded the direct election of regional governors, a change from the Presidential to the Parliamentary system, and a total dismantling of the autocratic structure built by former President Nursultan Nazarbayev who had ruled the country for 29 years. Protests are rare in a tightly controlled and

relatively stable country like Kazakhstan, but the submerged pressures finally erupted.

So broadly, the protest was driven by resentment against the elite-run political system that allowed endemic corruption, squandered the nation's wealth from oil and uranium, and stashed billions of dollars in offshore havens for 30 years. Protesters demanded a complete overhauling of the system, and a leader from outside it.



The Mayor's office building after it was stormed by violent protestors in Almaty, Kazakhstan, January 6, 2022. Source: Reuters

Nobody appeared to be leading the protests. Some 20,000 protesters in the capital appeared fragmented and leaderless. It was not clear whether this was a democratic uprising, a Colour Revolution, or an Arab Spring type of protest. This certainly was not a geopolitically driven crisis.

Nazarbayev's Clumsy Fall

Kazakhstan is not a democracy, but Nazarbayev was not quite an authoritarian like in the mould of Xi Jinping or Kim Jong-un. He had done exceptionally well since independence to build a system that ensured relative economic

prosperity and political stability. Kazakhstan under him was a far more stable, prosperous, and tolerant country than its neighbours.

Nazarbayev did not opt for a Russian-type model. Instead, he chose a Singaporean or Turkish style economic model that helped attract huge investments in the country's oil sector over the last few decades, including from the US and other Western companies, while following a shrewd, non-ideological 'multi-vector' foreign policy suited to his country's interests. He pushed to build multiple energy pipelines to both Europe and China without hurting ties with Russia. Nazarbayev was an adroit player who joined the Russian-led CSTO as also NATO's Partnership for Peace. He favoured the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union but also allowed President Xi Jinping to launch his BRI project from Kazakhstan in 2013.

The problem for Nazarbayev arose when he gave up the presidency without leaving the power. His resignation in 2019 set off an opaque succession process. While the presidential post was given to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Nazarbayev and his family continued to retain key positions in the country's security and political apparatus. This meant that Nazarbayev continued to rule the roost behind the scenes – the reason why the protesters' anger was directed more against Nazarbayev than at Tokayev as they shouted the "Shal ket" (old-man-go) slogan. A bronze statue of him was pulled down from the main square in Taldykorgan. He should have left when it was time for him to leave power; this was a big insult for a leader who was given the official title of "father of the nation."

The Upsurge

Clearly, amorphous street mobs appear to have been hijacked later by more opaque elements that spread violence and arson across cities that resembled events in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and in 2020. The government suspected these to be led by an organised crime network calling the shots from a central headquarters.

Russian Military Intervention

When the gravity of the crisis became dire as rioters assaulted government buildings, Tokayev called them "bandits and terrorists" and ordered "shoot-to-kill" without warning.¹ He also immediately sought help from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) on the ground that the chaos was

¹ Kazakhstan: President gives shoot-to-kill order against protesters | DW | 07.01.2022. DW.COM. Retrieved 17 January 2022, from <https://www.dw.com/en/kazakhstan-president-gives-shoot-to-kill-order-against-protesters/a-60354912>.

instigated by 'international terrorists' to undermine the country's territorial integrity.



Russian President Vladimir Putin attending a virtual emergency meeting of the Council of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) at the Novo-Ogaryovo state residence, January 10, 2022. Source: President of Russia, Official Website

The West has questioned Tokayev's right to use force and deploy Russian troops. But the Kazakh government had little choice but to do so. This has happened elsewhere in the region, such as during the Andijan crisis in Uzbekistan in 2005.

Signs of a Power Struggle

Tokayev immediately decided on January 5, 2022 to dismiss Nazarbayev who was heading the National Security Committee (KNB). He may have not done so without a sound political reason.

Nazarbayev's nephew Samat Abish, who was the deputy head of the KNB since December 2015, was also fired. Abish was suspected to have had a hand in organising the unrest, and is a known follower of the Muslim Brotherhood.²

Karim Masimov, who had earlier headed the country's chief intelligence agency KNB, was arrested on January 6 on charges of treason. This was

² Samat Abish Is Out of the Game. Kz.expert. (2021). Retrieved 16 January 2022, from https://kz.expert/en/news/analitika/2255_samat_abish_isout_ofthe_game.

significant as he was the only ethnic Uyghur insider and a powerful and longtime member of Nazarbayev's coterie.

On January 8, the Kassym-Jomart Tokayev declared that there had been an attempted coup d'état to seize power. In a speech to an online meeting of CSTO on January 9, Tokayev said that the events were coordinated by "a single centre" with "direct participation of terrorists, including foreign mercenaries".³ "Under the guise of spontaneous protests, a wave of unrest broke out.. It became clear that the main goal was to undermine the constitutional order and to seize power."⁴ Tokayev said that order had now been restored in Kazakhstan, but the hunt for "terrorists" was ongoing; the fleeing militants were using a strategy of changing into civilian clothes, shaving their beards, and so on. He promised to come up with more details after a preliminary investigation is completed. Russian President Putin too expressed the view that the unrest had been exploited by "external forces".

Kazakhstan's Interior Ministry has said that 26 "armed criminals" have been killed, while 18 law-enforcement officers have died.⁵ Over 700 policemen and 1000 civilians were injured. As of January 10, 7,939 people have been detained.

Tokayev has since stated that the CSTO mission numbering 2,030 troops and 250 pieces of military hardware would go home "soon". Russian leader Putin has also confirmed they would leave as soon as their mission ended.

Conspiracy Theories Abound

Events in Kazakhstan have unfolded at breakneck speed. With each passing day, murky details are surfacing. Conspiracies abound, with widespread public discussion over the mystery that led to the bloody unrest, some calling it a failed rebellion. What took place did not resemble anything like a political movement, but was more of a directed operation.

There have been unverifiable suggestions of a colour revolution instigated by Western intelligence. The rioters that attacked police forces and stormed the ammunition centre seemed very well trained and included snipers who shot policemen from afar. Three of the policemen killed were beheaded, which points to some Jihadist elements.

³ Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). (2022). Press Release, 10 January 2022 Retrieved from https://en.odkb-csto.org/news/news_odkb/10-yanvarya-v-formate-videokonferentsii-sostoitsya-zasedanie-soveta-kollektivnoy-bezopasnosti-odkb-p/#loaded

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Kazakhstan unrest: Ex-intelligence chief arrested for treason. BBC News. (2022). Retrieved on 17 January 2022, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59922258>.

Kazakh officials have claimed that the rioters were under someone's direction, that some were foreigners, and their numbers have been estimated as high as 20,000.

The Pan-Turkic dream envisaged by Turkey is an undercurrent that has thus far been thwarted by Iran, Russia, and China. All the Turkic-speaking areas, including Xinjiang, have been looking to Ankara. Like in Armenia, Turkish involvement in Kazakhstan is viewed as a probable scenario. Jihadist elements are speculated to have come from Turkey, Syria, and other places. Turkey has taken control of Islamist extremists in Syria during its continuing civil war.

Interestingly, the unrest occurred in cities near Kazakhstan's border with Xinjiang, which could have spilled over across the borders and impacted Beijing's Winter Olympics.

Finally, there has been some speculation about a US role in attempted regime change in Central Asia, after the Pentagon's attempts at securing new bases in Central Asia was denied by regional countries in the post-Afghan withdrawal scenario.

Players and Interests

Nazarbayev headed the country's top security apparatus KNB, but it was Karim Masimov who actually oversaw the daily security affairs. Karim has been a longtime confidant of Nazarbayev.

The removal and arrest of Masimov on charges of treason point to the possibility that there was an attempted coup d'état against President Tokayev by Nazarbayev's clan. It is being reported that Nazarbayev's family had left Kazakhstan, and he has not been seen in public since the end of December, 2021.⁶

In any event, Tokayev's actions and remarks against Nazarbayev reflect a widening rift in the ruling elite against the backdrop of protests. Tokayev finally

⁶ See Walker, S. (2022). Where is Kazakhstan's former longtime leader Nursultan Nazarbayev?. The Guardian. Retrieved 17 January 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/16/where-is-kazakhstans-former-longtime-leader-nursultan-nazarbayev>

French Press Agency (AFP). (2022). Nazarbayev is in Kazakhstan, in direct contact with Tokayev: Spox. Daily Sabah. Retrieved 17 January 2022, from <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/asia-pacific/nazarbayev-is-in-kazakhstan-in-direct-contact-with-tokayev-spox>.

opened up on January 11, firing a tirade at his predecessor who he said had created "a layer of wealthy people, even by international standards".⁷

It also appears that Tokayev was aware of the behind the scenes attempt to grab power by Nazarbayev's close coterie. Russia would have known about this too, and its support for Tokayev provided an opening for Moscow to secure an invitation for the CSTO military intervention. This would explain the swiftness of the Russian military which has surprised many.

With Masimov now in prison on treason charges, Nazarbayev's role in power has ended unceremoniously.

For the United States, the instrumentality of Masimov, who had Presidential ambitions, was critical for formulating a role in Central Asia after the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Masimov was keen to push Oil and Gas pipelines more directly towards the West. He had called for an extension of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline to Israel. With him out of the picture, Russia and China may get the pipeline plan re-routed more directly towards Russia and China. The implication is that Kazakhstan will be more firmly integrated with Russia as well as with China's BRI in the years to come.

Another story doing the rounds is that the coup attempt was the handiwork of Mukhtar Ablyazov, a former Kazakh Banker and oligarch who had reportedly embezzled \$5 billion through a range of offshore schemes.⁸ Ablyazov fled to London in 2009, but is said to have been actively involved in regime change activities in Kazakhstan. He is now allegedly in Kyiv, calling for Western sanctions against Kazakhstan.⁹

According to estimates of the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) Kazakhstan has 38,000 active NGOs, the majority of them funded by the United States and European countries.¹⁰ US entities present in the country

⁷ Averre, D. (2022). Kazakh president issues rare criticism of predecessor. Mail Online.

Retrieved 17 January 2022, from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10390375/Kazakh-president-blames-predecessor-creating-layer-wealthy-people-rule.html>.

⁸ Ranson, C. (2012). Kazakhstan's BTA Bank Closer to Recovering Assets. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved 17 January 2022, from

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/05/23/kazakhstan-s-bta-bank-closer-to-recovering-assets-pub-48602>.

⁹ "KP": Mukhtar Ablyazov was preparing a riot in Kazakhstan from Kiev. Azlyrics. (2022).

Retrieved 17 January 2022, from <https://azlyrics.com/az/lyrics/kp-mukhtar-ablyazov-was-preparing-a-riot-in-kazakhstan-from-kiev/>.

¹⁰ Prince, R. (2022). Foreign NGOs may have played an important role in the anxiety of the United States and Kazakhstan, according to experts. - Worldakkam. Worldakkam. Retrieved 17 January 2022, from <https://worldakkam.com/foreign-ngos-may-have-played-an-important-role-in-the-anxiety-of-the-united-states-and-kazakhstan-according-to-experts/627958/>.

include USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy, the American Bar Association, Freedom House, and several others, including the Soros Foundation. This is giving rise to speculation about the possible involvement of several players, including private contractors, working together to engineer a Colour Revolution in the Eurasian heartland. Foreign funded NGOs are likely to come under heavy scrutiny in coming months.

China has watched the situation in Kazakhstan with obvious concern, saying that China stands ready to assist Kazakhstan as an SCO partner.¹¹

The Kazakh authorities are undertaking an investigation into the violent protests. It goes without saying that Moscow will too, and its retributions could well include attempts to impose tighter control over Central Asia. The situation in Kazakhstan will remain rife with uncertainty for the present.

¹¹ China could provide assistance, support to help Kazakhstan restore order, develop economy: analysts - Global Times. Globaltimes.cn. (2022). Retrieved 16 January 2022, from <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202201/1245391.shtml>.

II. Kazakhstan Unrest: Geopolitical Ramifications

Clearly, the magnitude of the Kazakh domestic crisis is serious enough to have regional and geopolitical dimensions. Western experts have been concerned that the intervention by Russian troops might have a long-term impact in Central Asia, although they largely see it in the context of Moscow strengthening Tokayev's authoritarian grip at the cost of suppressing the Kazakh people's democratic rights.¹²

The question now is how the situation gets played out geopolitically and how Moscow, Beijing, and Washington respond.

Moscow's Sphere of Influence

Kazakhstan is not a typical case of the West vs. Russia narrative that is being played out in Ukraine, or being witnessed elsewhere during colour revolutions. Kazakhstan lies in Russia's eastern backyard and falls very much within its exclusive sphere of influence, but more as Russia's soft underbelly.

Strategically, Central Asia is considered as Russia's outer boundary, a predictable buffer to fend off threats from the south. Therefore, the Russian move in Kazakhstan can be considered as geopolitically motivated to forestall any external threats damaging Russia itself. Moscow has been deeply disturbed by the sight of street protests which mirror the 'revolution' that occurred in Kyrgyzstan in 2020.

The trouble in Kazakhstan has come after the Taliban's victory in Kabul, so Moscow could not have taken a chance by staying away. Even though Moscow remains preoccupied with tensions along its European border, the decision to rapidly deploy minimum troops in Kazakhstan is meant to ward off potential Islamist extremism raising a challenge from its southern periphery.

Kazakhstan's official statements have indicated that Islamic Jihadists had a major role to play in the unrest. Both President Tokayev and President Putin have pointed to the attempt by Jihadist elements to take power as the reason for the deployment of the CSTO peacekeeping forces.

This raises the question whether the Taliban's military victory in Afghanistan has energised Central Asian Islamist forces. There has been a gradual shift towards Islamisation, if not full radicalisation, that has been taking place in the

¹² Imamova, N. (2022). Experts Fear Turn to Russia, Greater Authoritarianism in Kazakhstan. VOA. Retrieved 17 January 2022, from <https://www.voanews.com/a/experts-fear-turn-to-russia-greater-authoritarianism-in-kazakhstan/6395649.html>.

region. There have been three revolutions/revolts/coups in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. Similarly, Islamic forces have taken to violence in Uzbekistan as well as Tajikistan.

The reality is that a new generation of Central Asians has grown up in a much more Islam-infused environment since the Soviet collapse. Mosques have been built and renovated all over the region with the funding coming from the Arab countries and from Turkey. Wearing of the hijab and burka by women has long become a symbol of an increasing Islamic influence, despite legislation being passed in Tajikistan requiring people to “stick to traditional clothes and culture”.¹³ People offering mass prayers in the open air had become a practice in Kyrgyzstan a decade ago. This time the protesters in Almaty were seen conducting mass prayers in the open air.



Russian President Putin meeting Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at the Kremlin, April 3, 2019. Source: President of Russia, Official Website

Openly available data suggests that more than 5,000 militants from Central Asian countries have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS since 2012.¹⁴ Over

¹³ Yıldırım, C. (2022). Tajikistan to ban hijab as restrictions on religious freedom continues. Daily Sabah. Retrieved 17 January 2022, from <https://www.dailysabah.com/asia/2017/09/18/tajikistan-to-ban-hijab-as-restrictions-on-religious-freedom-continues>.

¹⁴ Kazakhstan - United States Department of State. United States Department of State. (2019). Retrieved 16 January 2022, from <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/kazakhstan/>.

1,000 Kazakhs had joined ISIS in Syria at the peak of the civil war. According to Kazakh officials, more than 700 Kazakh nationals have been repatriated from Syria. The Country Reports on Terrorism 2019 issued by US Department of State indicates that Kazakhstan has taken a major initiative in providing rehabilitation and reintegration services to returnees.¹⁵

In fact, the Kazakh government has a five-year (2018-2022) program against "religious extremism and terrorism," but outside experts have doubted the efficacy of this Kazakh strategy.¹⁶ In 2018, it approved a \$ 900 million programme for counterterrorism. But then between January and June of 2019, Kazakhstan also carried out "Operation Zhusan," which repatriated 595 Kazakhstan citizens from Syria. The Committee for National Security (KNB), which Karim Masimov headed, coordinated multiple state agencies involved at the local level.

It would appear that Kazakhstan has been leading the way in repatriating Kazakh Jihadists, which experts have lauded as a model for other countries. Kazakhstan created 17 regional support centres to implement its reintegration model that included "reducing social stigmatisation of returnees by issuing clean passports and documents that will allow them to integrate more easily."¹⁷

Experts, however, have always doubted whether Kazakhstan's lenient approach might not become a challenge for the country in the long term.¹⁸ Apparently, the returnees were being used as a propaganda tool by the Kazakh government to project the power of the ruling elite. Interestingly, US officials have played an important role in providing Kazakh authorities with assistance for effective rehabilitation programs. It has also commended Kazakhstan's efforts to repatriate foreign fighters.

Importantly, Kazakhstan has also hosted talks between the Syrian government and jihadists - perhaps including jihadists familiar with the prospect of creating the next Islamic State in Kazakhstan - a strong similarity with Syria indeed.

Kazakhstan also reportedly agreed to relocate Afghan USAID personnel to Almaty from Kabul, who had been helping in the "repatriating, rehabilitation and reintegration" of foreign fighters.

It would appear that Islamists, from local Jihadists to ISIS fighters, were becoming well entrenched in and around Kazakhstan, a dangerous development for a country that formerly housed the famous Semipalatinsk

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

nuclear testing site. The country had also housed several biological warfare (BW) related research, production, and testing sites, such as the Vozrozhdeniye Island Open-Air Test Site in the Aral Sea, the Scientific Experimental and Production Base (SNOPB) in Stepnogorsk, the Scientific Research Agricultural Institute (NISKhI) in Gvardeyskiy, and the Anti-Plague Scientific Research Institute in Almaty.

Besides, Islamists have been eyeing the Caspian Sea peripheral with its rich hydrocarbon resources ever since the Soviet Union collapsed.

Russia may have taken these factors into consideration for its intervention, in order to protect strategic installations in Kazakhstan.

China Factor

Make no mistake: Russia is fully aware of China's long-term strategic plans to dominate Eurasia. Unrest in Kazakhstan could bring Chinese influence, which is on the rise, that much closer. It has already been witnessed that political chaos in Kyrgyzstan and in Tajikistan have pushed both closer to China. China's intrusive presence and its 'debt-trap diplomacy' have pushed these countries into political and financial stress – causing public anxiety, anger, and even chaos in some cases. In fact, the poorer Central Asian countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have now fallen prey to China's debt trap.

Any misstep by Moscow to allow a power vacuum in Kazakhstan would have allowed China to expand its influence, providing a huge strategic dividend for Beijing to push its multibillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative deeper. For the time being, the Russian intervention has blocked Beijing's aggressive expansion plans. No matter how much China invests in Central Asia, Russia will continue to ensure that it calls the shots in regional security and stability.

Russian Stakes

Russia did not have any choice but to intervene, with its huge strategic, economic, and security stakes. It shares a 7,600 kilometres (4,722 miles) long border with Kazakhstan.

As of 2020, Kazakhstan had 3.5 million ethnic Russians, or 19 percent of the country's total population of 19 million. They are mostly located in north Kazakhstan bordering Russia's Omsk, Kurgan, Tyumen, Altai Krai, Novosibirsk, Orenburg, and Chelyabinsk regions. Here, one cannot make out whether you are travelling in Russia or Kazakhstan.

Not just geography and demography, but Kazakhstan also hosts several strategic Russian assets including the Baikonur Cosmodrome, the Kapustin Yar missile test-firing range, and several other military installations.

Kazakhstan's energy reserves are critical for Russia to have greater leverage over energy importing Europe, but these reserves also allow it to gain leverage in making China dependent on Russian controlled energy sources. Russian oil companies have major stakes and Moscow is also involved in uranium mining in Kazakhstan. A Russian-built nuclear power plant is likely to be completed soon.

Diplomatically, Kazakhstan is bound with Russia by numerous multilateral treaties, such as the CIS, CSRO, and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), ensuring that it remains steadfastly within Moscow's orbit.



Russian-led CSTO troops begin withdrawing from Kazakhstan after their peacekeeping operation, January 13, 2022. Source: Collective Security Treaty Organisation.

There has been speculation about Russia's motivation to annex the northern parts of Kazakhstan where around 3.5 million ethnic Russians live. This fear has been growing in Kazakhstan for a long time – a reason why Nazarbayev decided to shift the capital from south to north and change the Kazakh alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin letters.

Of course, such speculation is dismissed by officials from both sides, but there is every reason to expect that Russia will stay put in oversight over the region

for the long haul. Russian troops are already stationed in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, where it has huge strategic assets including military bases.

However, considering both the sensitivity of the issue as well as instability in the region which might entrap Russia, deployment of its military is likely to be of limited duration. Tokayev has already announced that Russian-led forces will leave in the next ten days.

Kazakhstan and Russia's Tensions with the West

As for Russia-West tensions, Russia has a tendency to see Kazakh developments as a western conspiracy to stir colour revolutions, and US meddling as a distraction on the eve of major Russia-US security talks. Moscow seems not to accept the protests in Kazakhstan as spontaneous and is looking for a hidden hand.

On the other hand, the West is using the Kazakh situation as another example of Russian meddling. The US has "questioned" the CSTO intervention. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has spoken sharply on the deployment of Russian troops to Kazakhstan and especially questioned the nature of the request for deployment. In an interview, Blinken said he would not conflate the situations in Ukraine and Kazakhstan, but mockingly remarked, "I think one lesson in recent history is that once Russians are in your house, it's sometimes very difficult to get them to leave." Blinken said that the US expects Kazakh authorities to deal with "peaceful protests in a way that protects the protesters, upholds their rights, and is consistent with the rule of law."

The West sees Russia's military move in Kazakhstan as a part of US-Russia strategic rivalry with linkage to the so-called "double expansion" of NATO and the European Union in Eastern Europe¹⁹. It is also being viewed as an attempt to divert Western attention from the tensions brewing in eastern Ukraine. In a similar vein, this could be seen as a Western attempt to divert Russia's attention from the western threat. The US has been cautious in making remarks, but former U.S. Ambassador to Kazakhstan, William Courtney, wrote on Twitter that "Kazakhstan's people know this is a popular uprising against corrupt tyranny, not an act of aggression by foreign-trained terrorist gangs²⁰."

¹⁹ America's New Deal With Europe: NATO Primacy and Double Expansion - Project on Defense Alternatives. Project on Defense Alternatives. (1997). Retrieved 16 January 2022, from <https://comw.org/pda/americas-new-deal-with-europe/>.

²⁰ Refer the tweet on William Courtney's Twitter Account, retrieved from <https://twitter.com/courtneywmh/status/1479001634739044358>

From Russia's perspective, it is also quite possible that its decision to intervene in Kazakhstan ahead of security talks with the US was meant to convey how determined Moscow is to defend what it sees as its sphere of influence.

It was indeed a significant deployment, the first of its kind by the Russian-led CSTO military bloc, even though Russia had helped Belarus leader Alexander Lukashenko in 2020 to resist popular protests. It had also sent Russian troops first into Georgia and then to Ukraine, to thwart what it claimed were West-engineered coups or colour revolutions.

Russia's propensity to deploy forces abroad has certainly grown over the years, alongside its growing influence over areas it considers as Russia's sphere of influence. Moscow's ability to intervene has extended from the Balkans to West Asia, and now to Central Asia. With this development, Kazakhstan will be drawn much closer to Moscow, reducing space for the policy of balancing interests between Russia, China, and the West that Nazarbayev had pursued.

Limits of American Power

The US has limited leverage to intervene in Kazakhstan. Beyond the standard policy to press the Kazakhs to respect human rights and hold free and fair elections, there is little that Washington can do at this moment.

The use of sanctions is not well suited for the Kazakh case; major American energy companies are deeply invested in the Kazakh economy. US energy giants such as Chevron, ExxonMobil, ConocoPhillips, and others are making good money with recovering resources in Kazakhstan. Any sanctions would mean retaliation by Kazakhstan to make these companies move out, which would be a big victory for Russia and China. The US would also be very careful about Kazakh domestic instability impacting American investments there.

China's Anxiety

The unrest is a source of anxiety for China because its BRI passes through Kazakhstan, where Beijing has invested billions over the last decade, to the tune of \$27.6 billion, especially in the energy sector. Chinese companies own a quarter of Kazakhstan's production and are fully involved in upstream activities, pipeline construction, oil refining, and gas processing. China's equity stakes in Kazakhstan's oil production have increased rapidly. The CNPC holds an 8.3 percent stake in the largest Kashagan oilfield, after an agreement was signed for a staggering \$30 billion for developing the offshore gas field with the help of a \$9 billion soft-loan from Chinese Banks. In the current situation, the fate of Chinese investments depends on the goodwill of Russian forces.

China's position has been that events in Kazakhstan are an internal affair, and that Beijing hopes the situation will stabilise soon²¹. The Kazakh government's crackdown, however, won an endorsement from China, with President Xi Jinping praising Tokayev for his "highly responsible" handling of the unrest. Clearly, for the time being, China has no option but to support the dispatch of CSTO forces to Kazakhstan. Beijing has also expressed its readiness to send intelligence officers to help its neighbour.

Regional Reactions

As the Kazakh government looks to hold onto power, regional governments are watching events closely. Their response has been rather mixed and cautious.

There was no doubt about the immediate support from Belarus and Armenia, who are members of CSTO. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, too, quickly dispatched their troops, numbering 200 and 150 respectively. The issue, however, sparked a heated debate in Kyrgyzstan's parliament. There have been public demonstrations against the idea of sending Kyrgyz troops to Kazakhstan.

Uzbekistan, which is not a CSTO member, had earlier supported the Kazakh government, called for the crisis to be handled independently and "without outside interference".²² But the statement issued by the Uzbek Foreign Ministry on its website appears to have been removed²³ or at least the English version is not available. However, the Organisation of Turkic States, of which Uzbekistan is a member, condemned the acts of violence in Kazakhstan and extended its readiness to support efforts to overcome the crisis.

Regional Impact

It is difficult to delve into the depths of Central Asian internal dynamics because, despite the former Soviet backdrop, all are very distinct countries. There is no single road map that would apply to all.

²¹ Chinese MFA: Kazakhstan will properly handle the protests, which is an internal affair of the country. Apa.az. (2022). Retrieved 16 January 2022, from <https://apa.az/en/asia/chinese-mfa-kazakhstan-will-properly-handle-the-protests-which-is-an-internal-affair-of-the-country-365316/>.

²² Abdulkerimov, B. (2022). Uzbek, Kazakh presidents discuss ongoing protests in Kazakhstan. Aa.com.tr. Retrieved 17 January 2022, from <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/uzbek-kazakh-presidents-discuss-ongoing-protests-in-kazakhstan/2466772>.

²³ Заявление МИД Республики Узбекистан в связи с событиями в Казахстане. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2022). Retrieved 16 January 2022, from <https://mfa.uz/ru/press/news/2022/zayavlenie-mid-respubliki-uzbekistan-v-svyazi-s-sobytyami-v-kazahstane---30933>.

Unlike in Kazakhstan where the country's political and economic dynamics are largely driven by rents from oil resources, and further embedded in patron-client relations, the political system in Uzbekistan revolves around the intricate interplay of major clan-regional networks that drives the country's economic interests. The economy stems largely from domestic production capacities, and as such social and economic factors play a key role in shaping the political scenario. For example, Shavkat Mirziyoyev comes from the powerful Samarkand-Jizzakh clan. The other major clan/regional groupings include Tashkent, Ferghana, and Kashkadaria. Although the system appears opaque, it remains the key to anchoring the state and society.

The clan-regional solidarity stands above any other form of social mobilisation, including religious solidarity – one reason why the country is insulated from protest movements despite the strong presence of Islamists in the region. The security services also play a much larger role in Uzbekistan, which is once again linked to clan solidarity.

This is one of the reasons why the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hizb-ut-Tehrir (HuT), the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) and others that are well entrenched in Uzbek society, especially in the Ferghana Valley, and have aimed to create an Islamic caliphate for decades, have failed to exploit the situation after long-time leader Karimov died in 2016.

Despite the opacity of Central Asian politics, clan solidarity allowed for a smooth leadership transition in Turkmenistan after the death of former Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov in 2006.

Karimov and Nazarbaev derived their social legitimacy as “fathers” of their respective nations during their long tenures in power.

In the case of Tajikistan, President Emomali Rahmon has been in power since 1992, playing on his image as a leader who established peace in the country while ending the prolonged Tajik civil war during 1992-1997.

The Kyrgyz experiment with parliamentary democracy has remained very shaky. Kyrgyzstan saw three violent revolutions (2005, 2010, and 2020) that ousted presidents. The country is now a parliamentary republic with the president serving as head of state.

This experiment looks unusual in a region traditionally ruled by presidents. In comparison to others, the Kyrgyzstan is sharply divided along regional and ethnic lines, with both Kyrgyz and Uzbek groups comprising a roughly equal share of the population in the south. The formation of coalition governments

has been driven primarily by individual and group interests, and not by any common ideology. Economically, it is the weaker state in the region, vulnerable to manipulation by outside powers. China has aggressively stepped-up economic expansion, while US and Russian interference has also posed challenges to the new parliamentary government. The country's location on a drug trafficking route out of Afghanistan and sharing the Fergana Valley - a hub of Islamic extremism - also shapes its polity. While optimists remain hopeful about Kyrgyzstan's success, the democracy experiment can either unite the country in the long run or rekindle fresh inter-ethnic violence and leave its south vulnerable to ethnic extremists and militant Islamists.

With the generational shift, the region's new leaders are finding themselves in need of a new support base for their political legitimacy. Here, despite the efforts to mute its influence, Islam is increasingly becoming a factor in politics. This was a known fact in southern Central Asia, but it is now manifesting itself in Kazakhstan as well.

The threat from radical Islam has become even more pronounced in the wake of recent events in Kazakhstan. At the CSTO meeting on January 9, the President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, stressed the need for stepping up counter-terrorism measures. He underlined the presence of sleeper cells in all the countries, as well as of militants who have returned from Syria. The security situation on the Tajik-Afghan border seems to be getting worse.

The Russian factor is indispensable to Central Asia, and the Kremlin makes sure that it plays a leading role. Moscow's recognition of any major leadership or policy changes in Central Asia is imperative, as it can deny legitimacy or plot to remove leaders if they do not serve Russian interests. Moscow will not hesitate to intervene if any Central Asian leader becomes overly pro-Western, pro-Chinese or pursue Islamist causes.

It is no surprise that the Russian factor was again in the limelight in the recent upheavals and changes in Kazakhstan.

Conclusion

Kazakhstan developments mark a new chapter for Central Asia, with Moscow ensuring that no other foreign countries interfered in the midst of violent unrest. It reinforces the role of Russia as the main security provider to the regional countries, irrespective of who comes to power there. Whether this will infuse a new sense of confidence among the region's largely authoritarian regimes of assured Russian support, or they will feel threatened by Russia's reassertion and intervention after 30 years, remains to be seen.

Russia has secured further strategic advantage vis-à-vis China, which has been increasing its assertions in Kazakhstan and the rest of the region in a big way, taking advantage of Russia's economic weakness.

Russian leader Vladimir Putin has demonstrated that he is a leader to be reckoned with. The CSTO's intervention offers a double advantage for Moscow, increasing its leverage in Kazakhstan while also raising the stakes over Ukraine.

The potential upside for the Kremlin's strategic intervention in Kazakhstan is that the regime there will be increasingly indebted to Moscow for its continuing security. It will also have a reverberating effect across the region.

However, whether Russia, or CSTO military contingents, can solve any of the underlying domestic fissures in Central Asian states through demonstrations of regime solidarity, or more upheavals lie ahead, only the future can tell.



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