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U.S.-Kazakhstan Relations at 30: Eurasian Security & Prosperity

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Introduction

In December 2021, The Republic of Kazakhstan reached an impressive milestone: 30 years of independence. Three decades of rapid economic, diplomatic, and social development accompanied strong bilateral relations with the United States. Today, the U.S.-Kazakhstan relationship can be characterized by four different dynamics, each of which have significant implications for Kazakhstan and greater Eurasia. First, and within days of the December 25 anniversary, the Central Asian state witnessed an outbreak of unprecedented unrest and violence, which has raised serious questions about stability and security. Second, Kazakhstan's biggest neighbor and former liege Russia is in the midst of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and Western sanctions that the war triggered may affect Nur-Sultan (the Kazakh capital). Third, the disastrous U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan last August left the Taliban in power and created a geopolitical vacuum, with regional powers now trying to deal with the resulting instability and vying for influence. Fourth, American efforts to counter the rise of China are a persistent factor in U.S.-Kazakhstan bilateral relations.

Each of these developments will have long-term effects on the future of Kazakhstan. They will also need to be factored into Washington's calculus in terms of how it will ensure that the Central Asian nation maintains its 30-year trajectory of impressive economic reforms. Three of the factors—a resurgent and belligerent Russia, an assertive China, and the regional impact of a Talibanized Afghanistan—are related to foreign policy, and therefore limit how much the U.S. can help Kazakhstan. Clearly, enhancement of Kazakhstan's international agency is an American national security interest. But when it comes to reforms that need to be accelerated, there is no other actor besides the U.S. that can assist Kazakhstan.

By helping Kazakhstan strengthen its political economy, Washington would be engaged in building up Nur-Sultan's capacity to weather these many strategic crosswinds. The nearly two weeks of crisis in January did not disrupt the progress of the past three decades.¹ But the recent civil strife and violence are indicators that the country needs to do far more on the good governance and economic reform front, including poverty alleviation and income inequality reduction. This area should be the focal point of the next stage of support from the Biden administration.

Without robust engagement from the U.S., Kazakhstan is vulnerable to three different centripetal forces: first, a Talibanized Afghanistan projecting insecurity on a regional scale on its southern flank; second, China is expanding its influence into Russia's former sphere of Central Asia from the east; and third, an increasingly aggressive Russia (with whom the country shares a massive border) has become an international pariah. This last factor

may have the farthest-reaching geopolitical consequences for Kazakhstan, as Nur-Sultan may soon be in the awkward position of pivoting away from Moscow diplomatically as hostilities continue in Ukraine. As the West coalesces against the Kremlin, it will become increasingly difficult for Nur-Sultan to maintain its balanced foreign policy approach towards Russia.

All three challenges intersect geospatially in Central Asia, an area of the world that merits far greater attention from the U.S. than it has received thus far. Located at the heart of the Eurasian landmass, Central Asia is also an area that regional players like Turkey, Iran, India, and Pakistan are also looking at strategically to enhance their influence in the region.² Yet, this is a region of the world where the U.S. has historically had the least amount of influence, for obvious geographic factors. Kazakhstan is the one of three countries in the world that share borders with both Russia and China (Mongolia and North Korea are the other two). Kazakhstan's entire northern and western flanks run along Russian territory, for some 4,750 miles. The country's entire eastern periphery, measuring 1,100 miles, runs along western China. It is thus sandwiched between the two great powers located on the opposite ends of Eurasia. Washington may not supplant either of Nur-Sultan's great power neighbors in terms of influence, but it can bolster Kazakhstan's ability to continue to chart an independent course by strengthening relations with it.

It has been 9 months since the U.S. ended its military intervention in Afghanistan, which has forced Washington to search for a new strategy to approach the southwest Asian nation that has fallen under Taliban rule. The dramatic collapse of the internationally backed Afghan political system in August 2021 might adversely impact U.S. and Kazakh plans for the region. Taliban efforts to consolidate power and the governance challenges the jihadist movement faces have massive consequences for stability and security across Central Asia.³ For the longest time, the expectation was that a battlespace equilibrium of sorts would exist in a post-American Afghanistan, which would have represented more continuity than change. But now chaos in the country will likely spill over into Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan – exposing the entire southern flank of Kazakhstan to a wave of major disruption wave radiating out of the strategic vacuum left behind in the southwest Asian country.

At a far more strategic level, the Biden administration is accelerating its efforts to contain an increasingly assertive China. Considering that China is more a land power than a maritime one, competing with Beijing hinges on Washington enhancing its current tactical engagement with Central Asia to a strategic one. In the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, as part of its approach to the former Soviet Union space, Washington strategically engaged with Central Asia, especially with its assistance on nuclear security and energy development. However, post-9/11, U.S. dealings with the region became a much lower

priority. Now with the need to counter Russia in the wake of its aggression in Ukraine and an imperative to counter an assertive China, Washington will need to expend its energies in this part of the world. While the U.S. was mired in conflict in Afghanistan, a cash-flush China was steadily exploiting Russia's growing financial constraints to expand its own influence in a region that has for the past two centuries been dominated by the Kremlin. Dual Russian and Chinese hostility towards the U.S. deeply complicates the American need to ensure that Central Asia does not become a region that China can dominate.⁴ There is a natural connection between the U.S. ending the longest war in American history and dealing with the geopolitical challenge of an increasingly aggressive China.

Meanwhile, Russian efforts to push back against what it perceives as a rapidly encroaching West, combined with President Vladimir Putin's imperial aspirations, have finally led to all-out war in Ukraine. However, Russian plans for Ukraine do not necessarily limit the Kremlin's ability to focus on its border with Kazakhstan. In January 2022, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev requested assistance from the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Nearly 3,000 alliance troops were deployed under Russian command to secure critical infrastructure amidst the unrest, though protest mitigation was left solely to Kazakhstani security forces. This proved a major stress-point for Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy, but not nearly as big of a test as Russia's invasion of Ukraine.



Kazakhstan, the region's de facto leader, has been asserting its independent course as a major post-Soviet state. The country does not wish to see itself and the region dominated by either the Russians or the Chinese. Like other post-Soviet countries, including Ukraine, Georgia, and Uzbekistan, Kazakh policymakers in Nur-Sultan are deeply interested in significantly building on their relationship with Washington.⁵ Kazakhstan and the U.S. thus have a far greater incentive to increase bilateral cooperation to ensure against the erosion of the gains made through their joint efforts over the past three decades. Because of their unique geo-strategic positioning, the Kazakhs have demonstrated the ability to be a reliable player in international affairs and are poised to be a major partner of the U.S.

Through a strategic collaboration with Nur-Sultan, Washington can deal with obstacles to their shared goals of peace and prosperity in the region. The U.S. can benefit from Russian and Chinese competition in Central Asia at a time when the Kremlin cannot focus on Ukraine and also project power in Central Asia.⁶ By deepening relations with Kazakhstan, the Biden White House can insulate the region from a Talibanized Afghanistan and prevent it from becoming China's superhighway to the Middle East and Europe.⁷ America must enhance security, diplomatic, and trade relationships with this region that it, at its own peril, has not been paying enough attention to.

Doing so will allow the Biden administration to advance American interests in Central Asia's regional sovereignty and stability. The U.S. will be able to secure Central Asia from the fallout from Afghanistan and be better positioned to respond to the challenge from China.⁸ Washington has a robust relationship with Nur-Sultan that the two sides can build upon to craft a regional architecture that ensures the sovereignty and integrity of Central Asian states. Washington can build on the successes of its 30 years of involvement with the region's major power, Kazakhstan, to recover from the failure of its 20-year intervention in Afghanistan.⁹

To ascertain how, moving forward, Washington can enhance its relations with Nur-Sultan it is first important to consider the full breadth of U.S.-Kazakhstan relations since the U.S. recognized the nascent state in 1991. It is critical to see what was accomplished and what were the shortcomings. But first, it is important to understand Kazakhstan's own potential and the Russian and Chinese interests in Central Asia.



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KAZAKHSTAN'S EMERGENCE AS AN INTERNATIONAL PLAYER

Multi-Vector Foreign Policy

It would not be an exaggeration to say that of all the sovereign nations to have emerged out of the implosion of the USSR, Kazakhstan, a country of nearly 19 million people and the ninth largest by area in the world, has been a success story of a post-Soviet transition. Under the leadership of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan not only rapidly transformed its political economy but also was able to skillfully navigate its foreign relations with Russia, China, and the U.S.¹⁰ What is perhaps most remarkable is that Kazakhstan not only adjusted to the realities of its strategic environs but went beyond, to position itself in the arena of international diplomacy.¹¹ For all these reasons, Kazakhstan represents a natural partner of the U.S., but one which Washington remains far from having fully engaged.

Kazakhstan appeared on the world map at a time when two major drivers were steering the globe towards unprecedented economic integration. First was the decline of communism, which moved countries which had long had socialist economies towards market reforms. Second, globalization, stemming from the information technology revolution, rendered countries much more connected and interdependent. These conditions, along

with the fact that Kazakhstan possessed commodities that are in high demand, allowed the country to rapidly shed its legacy as a Soviet Socialist Republic.¹²

President Nazarbayev played a key role in ensuring that the necessary reforms were instituted in order for the country to move away from command economy and present itself to the West, especially the U.S., as open for business and investments. These timely and very early decisions set the country on a path towards a strong political, economic and security relationship with Washington. The U.S.-Kazakh strategic relationship—built on the twin pillars of security in the former Soviet Union (FSU) and developing its capacity as a major energy exporter—was a priority for the former president. The Nazarbayev administration worked closely with the administration of President George H. W. Bush in order to ensure that Kazakhstan emerged from the Soviet implosion on a strong footing, especially in the areas of hydrocarbons and arms control.

There are certain key elements of Kazakhstan’s national development approach that have remained remarkably consistent and successful. These include:

1. Wealth generated by energy/Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from the West.
2. A focus on international education through the Bolashak Fellows and other programs, to increase human capacity.
3. A multi-vector foreign policy. It is this last element that is at the heart of Kazakhstan’s national security strategy, which is informed by the imperatives and constraints of geography.

Kazakhstan’s geographic destiny has created a deep need to seek balance between great powers while pursuing relations with the West, especially with the U.S. The traditional acrimony between Washington and Moscow, as well as the more recent growing tensions between the U.S. and China, reinforce the Kazakh commitment to its multi-vector strategy. It is not limited to simply navigating the triangular power competition. It helps Nur-Sultan maintain good relations with a diverse set of actors across the globe.

How Russia and China View Central Asia and Kazakhstan

Since the implosion of the USSR, Moscow has sought to maintain influence in the regions that were part of the FSU. This has been a major interest of the Kremlin because of the early loss of the Baltic states to NATO and the broader threats that the Russian Federation perceives from expanding western influence. The bulk of the Russian focus



has been on the European states on its western periphery and on its southern flank in the South Caucasus region.¹³ Moscow has found it easier to maintain influence in Kazakhstan and the other four Central Asian states as it did during the Soviet era and even before, during the age of Russian imperial dominance.

The Russian Federation has created several international organizational frameworks in order to maintain its influence in its “near abroad.”¹⁴ These include the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS; e. 1991), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO; e. 1992), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO; e. 2001), and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU; e. 2015). CIS, CSTO, and EAEU serve the purpose of maintaining Russian economic and security influence in the FSU in general and Central Asia in particular. Russia’s involvement in the SCO is a way for the Kremlin to engage with China and other Asian players, such as India and Pakistan, to maintain security in Central Asia and try to limit Chinese influence.

After the first decade of close relations with Kazakhstan, U.S. engagement has remained limited, which has served Russian interests well. The fact that Washington was mired in wars in the Middle East and South Asia immensely helped Moscow. From the Kremlin’s perspective, the jihadist conflicts of the past two decades have prevented Washington from making inroads into Central Asia and the broader Russian near abroad. In fact, the U.S. sought Russian assistance in the form of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) in order to have an alternative supply route for U.S.-led NATO military operations in Afghanistan, which continued from 2009 to 2015. The NDN was essential for the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan after the supply route running through Pakistan became unreliable.¹⁵

While the U.S. has not posed a challenge to Russia in Central Asia, other factors have reduced Moscow’s ability to shape the region. First and foremost is that Moscow has had to focus on Ukraine and Georgia and with limited financial resources, contingent on fluctuations in the price of oil and other commodities. The 2014 ouster of the Yanukovich administration in Kyiv and Russia’s aggressive military posture in response led to international sanctions that further constrained Moscow financially.

Meanwhile, Kazakhstan and (to a lesser extent) Uzbekistan have been able to assert themselves economically. Likewise, on the cultural front these two major Central Asian states have been engaged in efforts to revive their national languages at the expense of Russian, which has long been the lingua franca of the region. That said, these developments do not represent a major challenge to Russia in the region. What does is China’s economic expansion into the region, largely for commercial purposes, especially since the 2013 launch of Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This massive infrastructure project, which entails constructing road, rail, fiber-optic cable, and energy transportation corridors, is a move to penetrate landlocked Central Asia. BRI has the potential to help

Beijing establish a sphere of influence in Central Asia, which then becomes a way to gain land access to the Middle East and Europe. The Chinese pushing into the region to fill the vacuum being left behind by a receding Russian footprint is a cause of concern for the Kremlin, especially when it must prioritize Ukraine and the Black Sea basin, which is strategically more critical.¹⁶

There are several impediments in China's path, however. First and foremost is the fact that Russia will remain a predictable and formidable military power in Central Asia for the foreseeable future, though this is contingent on the outcome of the war in Ukraine. Thus far, though, Moscow has been unrelenting in defending (and expanding when possible) its influence and interests. Beijing has not yet demonstrated the capability to deploy a multi-divisional force or significant special forces beyond its border. All indications are that the Chinese will remain focused on increasing their economic advantage in the region.

Even on the economic front, China is not without constraints. The Uyghur crisis in north-western China has the potential to undermine Beijing's plans for Central Asia.¹⁷ This has to do with the location of Xinjiang province, which is the gateway to the region. The Chinese Communist Party views Xinjiang as a threat because of Beijing's inability to assimilate its ethnically Turkic and religiously Muslim community in a country where 92 percent of the population is Han Chinese, and the largest organized religion is Buddhism. The U.S. has accused China of committing genocide against its Uighur minority in the light of evidence that it has detained over a million Uyghurs in "re-education camps" and jailed hundreds of thousands of others. There are reports that Uyghurs are being used as forced labor and that women are being forcibly sterilized.¹⁸ This campaign of terror creates major problems for Central Asian states that have relations with China, especially Kazakhstan. The Chinese cannot comfortably press ahead with their plans for the region as long as the Uyghur situation is unresolved, which would explain their industrial-scale efforts to suppress the minority community.

Exacerbating matters for the Chinese is the Taliban comeback in Afghanistan in the wake of the end of the U.S. military mission there. A Taliban-administered Afghanistan is at risk of mass starvation in large part due to frozen assets overseas. As a purely ideological insurgent movement, the Taliban have been struggling to make the transition to governing, especially over a population exposed to Western-style freedoms for over a generation. Meanwhile, the security situation is deteriorating, with growing ISIS attacks that are trying to bait states in the region into engaging in military interventions. The Chinese have been steamrolling ahead with their BRI projects in Pakistan and Kazakhstan and elsewhere since 2013, with major plans for expansion from Central Asia into Iran.¹⁹ It was able to proceed in all these directions because the U.S. was underwriting regional security by ensuring that there was no spillover from Afghanistan into adjacent regions. Now that the

U.S. has left, the future of China's initiatives is mired in uncertainty and Beijing is trying to cooperate with Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and the Central Asian nations to find a new regional mechanism for security in Afghanistan.

Perhaps the most significant obstacle is that the Central Asian states, while wanting to benefit from China's economic investments, are wary of falling under undue Chinese influence. They certainly do not want to be caught in the great power competition.²⁰ This position especially applies to Kazakhstan, which is the region's most prosperous nation and is already playing an important role well beyond Central Asia. Kazakhstan's ability to continue to be an international player, however, is contingent upon how it navigates much-needed political economic transformation on the home front, where it has run into some headwinds.

Power Transition Challenge

After being at the helm for almost three decades, President Nazarbayev voluntarily handed over the presidency to his close associate Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev, in March 2019. Tokayev had served in various capacities, including as prime minister, foreign minister, and most recently, chairman of the senate. Tokayev was then elected president in contested national elections in June 2019.²¹ Though the transfer of power had been in the works for some time, it came as a surprise and there had been concerns about Nazarbayev continuing to exercise authority from behind the scenes—making his successor a figurehead.²² He has been criticized for weakening the office of the president and remaining chair of the republic's security council for life. The winter 2022 unrest and violence resolved this matter, when Tokayev first removed Nazarbayev as head of the national security council and then the former president himself declared that he stood retired.²³

As someone who emerged as a leader during the Soviet era, Nazarbayev was not expected to give up power voluntarily. That said, it has been a little over two years and there does not seem to be any publicized evidence of interference from Nazarbayev in matters of governance and policy. Considering how Nazarbayev's rule had been marked by pragmatism, it would have been odd if he had not planned for the time, he would not be able to rule his country. His decision to have Tokayev exercise authority while he held the chair of the security council underscores a balance between abruptly leaving office and continuing to rule indirectly.²⁴

Political reform remained a bone of contention, however. While Nazarbayev declared "economy first—democracy later," with the focus being on economic reforms, Tokayev

declared that he would cautiously proceed with social and political reforms. According to Freedom House's 2020 report, the government of Kazakhstan has shown some level of tolerance for freedom of assembly, as evident from the increase in small protests recently.²⁵ Earlier last year, Tokayev introduced a reforms package that includes reducing the threshold for parties gaining seats in the legislature from 7 to 5 percent, overhauling the human rights commission and creating its regional offices, and providing quotas for women and youth in the country's senior decision-making positions in the Kazakhstani parliament, or Majilis.²⁶

More recently, on March 16, Tokayev announced a string of fresh and far more significant reforms.²⁷ This latest move is a very positive development, especially in the aftermath of the public unrest in January and it shows state responsiveness to public demands. Once implemented, these reforms will accelerate the political transition underway since Tokayev succeeded former President Nursultan Nazarbayev. The move to strengthen parliament and have the president terminate his membership in the ruling party during his term in office is a key initial step on the way to democratization. A competitive media, changes to electoral laws, and encouraging the formation of political parties will go a long way in ensuring that Kazakh people will play a greater, and much-needed, role in shaping their republic. Once implemented, these reforms will lead to an improved environment for civil society activism and parliamentary life. While the scope of reforms remains limited, it is noteworthy that the state is allowing some openings for civil society actors to operate, especially when it comes to issues related to women.²⁸ Towards this end, on June 5 a national referendum - the first in 27 years - on potential amendments to the constitution that could alter more than a third of the national charter. President Tokayev has said that the changes would bring an end to the "super presidential" system paving the way for a Second Republic.

Corruption remains a challenge. According to Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index, Kazakhstan ranked 94 out of 180 countries—an improvement from 113 in 2019.²⁹ Meanwhile, in October and December of 2020, President Tokayev signed laws that tightened the country's anti-corruption legislation. These amendments eliminated a provision allowing certain categories of public officials to receive minor gifts; state servants are no longer allowed to accept any gifts or benefits, whatever their nature and value. In addition, the legislation expanded the definition of "public officials" to include persons authorized to make decisions on public tenders and those responsible for the selection and implementation of projects financed by the state budget as well as the family members of these officials. The penalties for bribery were also increased, now punishable by a monetary penalty of up to 30 times the value of the bribe or imprisonment for up to five years. Furthermore, public officials are now prohibited from opening and maintaining bank accounts with foreign banks operating outside the country.³⁰

The democratization of historically autocratic systems entails great risks. This is all the more of a concern for elites presiding over weak economies. But for the Kazakh elite, the stakes are much higher, given the potential for rapid political reforms leading to instability.³¹ The January 2022 public protests against the increase in fuel prices and the broader discontent with political and economic conditions which led to the outbreak of violence underscored the need for greater reforms but also the risk of instability. A repetition of such a scenario would certainly lead to a loss of the economic gains that the country has experienced in the three decades since its emergence from the Soviet collapse. Here is where the U.S. has a unique role to play and must build upon its 30-year relationship.



Chevron factory main building, Atyrau, Kazakhstan. photo: rezoff/shutterstock.com



Secretary Kerry Meets With
Kazakhstan President
Nazarbayev in Astana, 2015
Photo: wikipedia.org

U.S.-KAZAKHSTAN RELATIONS

Kazakhstan's appearance as an independent nation-state because of the 1991 disintegration of the USSR kicked off the *first* era of U.S.-Kazakh relations. It was characterized by nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation policies and massive U.S. and Western investment in the Kazakhstani hydrocarbons sector. Both policies were designed and led by President Nazarbayev. It lasted till 2001, when the U.S. was drawn into conflict with transnational jihadism and pulled away from its earlier focus on developing a global system of international relations for managing a post-Cold War world.³² During that decade, Washington developed very close relations with the newly emerged Republic of Kazakhstan. What kept the two nations engaged was the immediate imperatives of nuclear security and energy-driven economic development.

The U.S. need to respond to the September 11, 2001, attacks marked the beginning of the *second* era of U.S.-Kazakh ties. Focused on the wars in the Middle East and South Asia, Washington was unable to continue building its bilateral relationship with Nur-Sultan.³³ Meanwhile, Russia was undergoing a geopolitical resurgence under President Putin, while China was regaining double-digit GDP growth after the slump in the 1990s. Thus, while continuing to develop relations with the Americans (at a lower tempo), the Kazakhs—in keeping with their multi-vector foreign policy approach designed by President Nazarbayev and Foreign Minister Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev—had to focus on their two emergent neighbors, the Russians and the Chinese.

The U.S. military departure from Afghanistan has ushered in a *third* era, in which Washington has the space and time to return to cultivating strategic relations with Kazakhstan and, by extension, Central Asia as a whole. The Taliban's return to power has deeply impacted China's strategic plans for the Central Asian region and broader Eurasia. For the past 20 years Beijing has immensely benefited from the fact that Washington effectively ensured that insecurity and instability remain contained within Afghan borders, allowing the Chinese to expand its economic interests in the region. The Chinese are now scrambling to establish a new *modus vivendi* to deal with a re-Talibanized Afghanistan, which represents a major window of opportunity for Washington to work closely with Nur-Sultan towards strengthening its national as well as regional sovereignty, which would act as a bulwark against outside manipulation.³⁴

After leaving Afghanistan, the U.S. was hoping to focus on dealing with the growing threats from a rising China. It was in this dual context that Washington could have enhanced its engagement with Kazakhstan. The unexpected and major domestic political crisis in Kazakhstan in January 2022 has rendered the task far more difficult than before. And Russia's war in Ukraine, which is part of its broader efforts to reshape the security architecture in Eastern Europe and in the Black Sea Basin region, has further complicated the situation.

The First Era (1991–2001): Supporting Independence, Developing Oil Fields

On December 25, 1991, the U.S. was the first country to recognize Kazakhstan's independence and within a few weeks opened its embassy in Almaty, the capital of the country at the time. President George H. W. Bush focused on security of the substantial nuclear arsenal left over from the Soviet collapse. The efforts to cultivate a strong relationship not only continued but were intensified by the Clinton administration. Bill Clinton became president a little over a year after Kazakhstan's declaration of independence. It was during his first term in office that the bulk of Kazakhstan's nuclear arsenal and facilities was dismantled through close cooperation with and assistance from Washington.

The U.S. imperative to ensure nuclear security in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a key driving factor in the accelerated pace at which Washington forged its relationship with the newly independent nation. The denuclearization of Kazakhstan would not have been possible if the administration of President Nazarbayev had decided to hold onto the 1,410 strategic nuclear warheads—the world's fourth largest arsenal—as well as

an undisclosed number of tactical weapons it inherited from the USSR. The renunciation of nuclear weapons and signing of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1993 led to close cooperation over the next decade with the U.S. to eliminate the nuclear arms infrastructure of the country.³⁵

The process began with the closure of the 18,000-square kilometer nuclear test site at Semipalatinsk, now Semey, one of two major test sites where the Kremlin conducted at least 460 tests since the late 1940s. Under the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program and at a cost of more than \$275 million, Washington helped the Nazarbayev administration to remove nuclear warheads, weapons-grade uranium and plutonium, and supporting infrastructure.³⁶ By 1994, Kazakhstan had transferred more than a half-ton of weapons-grade uranium to the U.S. and by the following year it had removed its last nuclear warheads. It sealed over 200 nuclear test tunnels over the course of the next few years.

Kazakhstan also became a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) within months of its independence and by September 1992 had signed the Helsinki Final Act and the Charter of Paris, giving it full membership. In addition to participation in Western institutions, Kazakhstan has played a key role in non-Western security organizations. In 1992, it founded the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), an inter-governmental forum for promoting peace, security, and stability in Asia. CICA, which consists of 27 states as full members and nine states, along with five organizations, with observer status, held its fifth summit meeting in 2019 in Tajikistan. Kazakhstan is also a senior member of both the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and China's Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

When the Soviet Union collapsed, there was tremendous amount of uncertainty all across its former territories. It was not clear whether its Russian core would hold together. For many of the USSR's constituent republics, especially Kazakhstan, the question was, would they be able to have a soft landing in the form of an independent state? Nazarbayev was initially ambiguous about outright secession and had to navigate through a great degree of geopolitical turbulence.³⁷ He engaged the U.S. for assistance in the nation-building process while Washington itself was coming to terms with Soviet collapse in real time. From Nazarbayev's point of view, replacing a Soviet-style political economic structure with a Western-style polity was fraught with risks. His immediate decision to denuclearize the new country was a watershed moment in that it helped address the immediate security issues and paved the way for a strong working relationship with the U.S. that would lead to the establishment of the new state on strong economic foundations.³⁸

Due to the U.S. oil companies' engagement and Western-advised economic reforms, Kazakhstan emerged as a stable and prosperous nation that fairly quickly began to build up a global diplomatic role, name recognition, and prestige. To a great degree, it has achieved this through its ability to balance enhanced ties with the U.S. with existing ones with Russia and a rising China.³⁹ In this way, the country is a model for other developing nations. Luckily, Kazakhstan has had the benefit of natural resources, which have played a critical role in its economic success.

The availability of natural resources alone is insufficient, however. The intent and capability of the leadership to make the appropriate decisions is critical to realizing national imperatives. Here is where Nazarbayev's leadership, as the country's founding president, proved impactful.⁴⁰ His leadership enabled consensus from the Kazakh elite on renouncing nuclear weapons and paved the way for a strong relationship with the U.S.

This decision was also a critical element in the development of a market economy. In an age where many developing nations (Pakistan, India, Iran, and North Korea) opted to obtain nuclear weapons capability—even at the cost of economic development and in the face of sanctions—Kazakhstan very early on demonstrated interest in realizing its full economic potential as an energy- and mineral-rich nation. By voluntarily renouncing its Soviet-era nuclear assets, Kazakhstan relieved a major American fear of nuclear proliferation.⁴¹ Working closely with the U.S. towards this objective paved the way for broader U.S.-Kazakhstan cooperation in the realm of energy investment and economic development.

While the Kazakhstanis moved to forge deep relations with the U.S., they were mindful of the need to balance Washington with Moscow. Though they had seceded from the USSR, they knew that they could not escape from the Kremlin's orbit because of geographic and demographic factors. At the time over 40 percent of its population was Russian-speaking. Likewise, Kazakhstan appreciated the need to balance in a tri-directional manner given that its large eastern neighbor China was emerging into a global economic player. Given its unique geopolitical circumstances and strategic requirements, Kazakhstan has been a pioneer and a global leader in "multi-vector foreign policy,"⁴² today's version of the non-aligned movement during the Cold War era.

A critical factor that has fueled Kazakhstan's economic growth is its natural resource riches. Oil in particular has been driving development in the country. However, without foreign investments from the U.S., this would not have been possible. Chevron and ExxonMobil invested in the country's energy sector during the first two decades of independence. For example, 1993 saw the formation of Tengizchevroil, a \$20 billion joint venture between Chevron and a subsidiary of Kazakhstan's state-owned oil enterprise. Towards the end of the decade, the Nazarbayev government sold a 25 percent stake in Tengizchevroil to ExxonMobil; Chevron's share is 50 percent.⁴³ As far as the two other Kazakh energy

giants go, Chevron has an 18 percent stake in Karachaganak and ExxonMobil owns 17 percent of Kashagan. The involvement of these two U.S. energy giants represents the core of U.S.-Kazakh economic relations. Accounting for over 70 percent of the region's \$181.6 billion GDP, Kazakhstan is the world's ninth-largest crude oil exporter and has the 15th largest proven natural gas reserves.

The Second Era (2001–2021): The War in Afghanistan

The events of September 11, 2001 upended the domestic and foreign policy trajectory of the U.S., with significant ramifications for its allies. This inflection point—the beginning of the War on Terror—represents the beginning of second era of U.S.-Kazakhstan relations. Here, Kazakhstan reaffirmed itself as a special U.S. ally by offering logistical support for the NATO mission in Afghanistan, primarily through the facilitation of the NDN and air-space access. Shared concerns over the spread of violent extremism brought both nations closer in their missions for enhancing global security and stability. The post-September 11 era marked the next big step in bilateral security cooperation.

The extraordinary nature of the Kazakh initiative and partnership with the U.S. led to the two sides cooperating closely on nuclear security on the multilateral level, with the Central Asian nation participation in the Nuclear Security Summits in Washington, DC (2010, 2016), Seoul (2012), and The Hague (2014). Kazakhstan continues to participate in the activities of the United Nations' nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency. It houses the IAEA's Low Enriched Uranium Bank in the northeastern city of Oskemen.⁴⁴ Nur-Sultan is also involved in all meetings that review the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Despite its renunciation of nuclear weapons, Kazakhstan has 12 percent of the world's uranium reserves, 43 percent of uranium ore production, nuclear industrial facilities and technological know-how. Therefore, as the EU recently recognized nuclear power generation as green, Kazakhstan is likely to play a global role in the efforts to harness nuclear technology for civilian purposes.⁴⁵

Cooperation in the nuclear security realm has led to U.S. collaboration in the broader security space with Kazakhstan. Nur-Sultan's security forces received funding from a variety of programs, such as U.S. International Military Education & Training; Foreign Military Financing; Overseas Humanitarian Disaster and Civic Aid; Wales Initiative Fund; Global Peace Operations Initiative; and Building Partner Capacity. The Kazakh armed forces take part in American-financed war games such as Steppe Eagle, Viking, Eager Lion, and Shanti Prayas.⁴⁶

The Third Era: Post-Afghanistan and the New Russia

The conclusion of the war in Afghanistan has brought the second period of U.S.-Kazakhstan bilateral ties to an end, one in which the U.S. was constrained in terms of how much attention it could devote to Central Asia and in particular Kazakhstan. The jihadist wars consumed the energies of three different American administrations such that they were not able to effectively address other major challenges around the globe. Russia's revival under Putin and China's emergence as a major global player took place while Washington placed a disproportionate amount of energy into the jihadist threat.

With the end of that era, we enter a third and far more uncertain period, one characterized by the great-power vacuum in Afghanistan and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Biden administration has a great opportunity to craft a well-considered strategy for Central Asia centered on closer alignment with Kazakhstan. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan seeks to continue developing its multi-vector diplomacy over the coming decades in order to realize its geo-economic objectives. How Nur-Sultan decides to navigate an increasingly isolated Moscow, however, will represent this strategy's toughest challenge.

Nevertheless, President Tokayev intends to build upon the successes achieved by his predecessor, President Nazarbayev.⁴⁷ In contrast with the closeness during the 1990s, Kazakhstan's relations with the U.S. has not grown in the past couple of decades, given Washington's focus on the post-9/11 jihadist wars. In the light of the shifting regional and global priorities, this is likely to change.

The *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* issued in March 2021 by the White House *underscores* how the Biden administration will need to seriously reassess its approach to Central Asia, which is a key component of its two principal foreign policy concerns: managing a combative Russia and contending with an assertive China. The region is not mentioned once in the 23-page document that focuses heavily on the need to counter China. The Biden administration cannot afford to ignore the region in its strategic thinking,⁴⁸ definitely not after the Taliban has seized control of Afghanistan and certainly not after the indiscriminate violence of Russia, the world's newest pariah state.



*NATO Summit Meeting
in Prague, Czech Republic.
Photo: Creative Commons 2.0*

KAZAKHSTAN ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

The U.S. and Kazakhstan have closely cooperated on security matters bilaterally and through many multilateral fora. Nur-Sultan is home to one of 15 field offices of the OSCE and in 2010 was the first former Soviet state to assume leadership of the organization.⁴⁹ The U.S. supported Kazakhstan's ascension to OSCE chair; the U.S.-Kazakhstan Task Force was created to achieve that goal. In addition, Kazakhstan is a member of the post-Cold War NATO institution known as the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and since 1994 in NATO's Partnership for Peace program.

In 2017–18, Kazakhstan was elected one of the 10 non-permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. During its membership, the country played a key role in the management of a variety of global crises: Syria, Ukraine, Iran, and North Korea. Nur-Sultan hosted a series of talks in Astana (the Astana Process) that led to the creation of de-escalation zones and ceasefires to secure civilians in Syria.⁵⁰ Between 2018 and 2020 Syrian security forces led a mission (Operation Zhusan) to retrieve 600 Kazakh citizens (along with their families) who were part of terrorist entities and reintegrate them in their home country.⁵¹

Afghanistan was also a key issue area that Kazakhstan focused on during its tenure on the Security Council, organizing a visit to Kabul by council members and launching a foreign ministerial initiative, "Building Regional Partnership in Afghanistan and Central Asia, to Link Security and Development."⁵² The innovative initiative was geared towards

highlighting the repercussions of an unstable Afghanistan on security and social stability in Central Asia.

During its two-year Security Council membership, Kazakhstan also served as president of its ISIL (Daesh), Al-Qaida and the Taliban Sanctions Committees. Under the direction of President Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan played a leading role in countering global terrorism through a Code of Conduct, which 80 states have signed, to achieve a terrorism-free world by 2045. Kazakhstan committed a company of 120 soldiers to the peacekeeping mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL) from October 2018 to 2019; since then, three subsequent peacekeeping groups have served there.⁵³

Kazakhstan also contributed advisors and medics to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force in 2011. Nur-Sultan partnered with Washington in U.S.-funded training programs to build capacity of the Afghan National Security and Defense Forces. And when the usual routes through Pakistan used to transport supplies for U.S.-led coalition forces operating in Afghanistan became unreliable in the late 2000s and early 2010s, Kazakhstan played a critical role in providing an alternative supply route known as the Northern Distribution Network, which included the ability to ferry supplies through the Trans-Caspian region.⁵⁴

Kazakhstan has been keen on contributing to regional security and enhance its defense relations with the U.S. Towards this end, and since the early 2000s, Nur-Sultan has engaged in military and intelligence cooperation geared towards counterterrorism and counter-insurgency objectives. These activities have helped Kazakhstan enhance its air defense, intelligence, and other military capabilities.⁵⁵ Kazakhstan's military personnel have greatly benefited from education and training opportunities at defense schools and academies in the U.S. And American military officials have spent time in Kazakh military academies.

Kazakhstan also maintains a robust relationship with the European Union (EU). In early 2020, Kazakhstan and the EU inked the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which paved the way for a new breadth and depth of ties.⁵⁶ The EU is far and away Kazakhstan's largest commercial partner, accounting for a 40 percent share of country's external trade.

In the context of a two-player geopolitical game, Russia and China are competitors when it comes to the Central Asia. They cooperate as well, considering that neither has the wherewithal to alone dominate the region. From Kazakhstan's point of view, there has existed a division of labor between Russia and China. Moscow managed regional security while Beijing's focus was on geo-economics.⁵⁷ Simultaneously, Kazakhstan has managed to keep up strong diplomatic, economic, and security ties with the West. This is the crux

of the “multi-vector” diplomacy formulated and implemented by first president Nazarbayev and his foreign minister Tokayev.

But the status quo is changing. Since 2015, the Chinese have moved into the regional security space. In 2016, it established a small military presence in Tajikistan to monitor developments in Afghanistan. Beijing has also significantly increased its sales of arms, going from 1.5 percent of the region’s military hardware in 2010–14 to 18 percent in 2015–20.⁵⁸ Kazakhstan’s multi-vector foreign policy approach, coupled with the fact that the U.S. is in the process of carving out a space for itself, heightens concerns for limits on how far Nur-Sultan enables an American sphere of influence. The U.S. should increasingly be involved in Central Asia, because of the need to deal with the uncertainty of a post-American Afghanistan and, even more, because of its need to counter China.

Both previous administrations launched major U.S. policy initiatives towards the region, which provide sound guidance but require further development on how to achieve the identified objectives.⁵⁹ Two years ago, the Trump administration unveiled the *United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019–2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity*. It was built on the first U.S. strategy for the region developed in 2015 alongside the C5+1 framework by the Obama White House.

That was the same year that Kazakhstan joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), with strong U.S. backing.⁶⁰ WTO membership has had a significant positive effect on Nur-Sultan’s ability to secure FDI. As a result, two years later Expo 2017 in Astana garnered a great deal of interest from international investors. That led to the 2018 establishment of the financial hub known as the Astana International Financial Centre (AIFC), which was instrumental in the country’s cumulative gross FDI inflows exceeding \$350 billion. AIFC membership has climbed from a modest 50 in 2018 to 792 firms this year.

Astana not only became a regional financial hub, but it was also a venue for international mediation talks on the Syrian conflict. Assuming the role of credible and neutral peacemaker, and beginning in early 2017, the Kazakh government hosted the Syrian regime and its opponents, along with their international backers (Russia, Iran, and Turkey) for talks. Ten rounds of negotiations geared towards an end to the brutal civil war were held in Astana (renamed Nur-Sultan in March 2019). The 16th round was held in July 2021.⁶¹ While the talks have not produced the desired results, they have served as an important mechanism for the states sponsoring the belligerents to manage the conflict.

From 2013 to 2015, Kazakhstan also hosted two rounds of talks between Iran and the P5+1 group that led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, otherwise known as the Iran nuclear deal. Kazakhstan’s decision to relinquish nuclear weapons affords it the moral authority and credibility to play a role in the Iran nuclear negotiations. The world’s leading

uranium producer, Kazakhstan was called upon to provide 60 tons of raw uranium to Iran in exchange for Tehran's surrender of 300 kilograms of highly enriched uranium. Nur-Sultan seeks to use its own experience in abandoning nuclear weapons as a means of convincing other nations that doing so can lead to significant security and prosperity dividends.⁶²

Between its efforts to revitalize the region towards the re-establishment of the Central Asian Union on more solid footing and using the C5+1 platform, Kazakhstan has been pursuing regional integration. This is in keeping with the thinking of the Obama administration, which saw the C5+1 mechanism as a way for the U.S. to carve out a sphere of influence in an area where the Russians and the Chinese have held far more sway. The problem, though, has been that the Obama White House perceived the C5+1 from an Afghan-centric lens. Even the Trump administration, in its negotiations towards the February 2020 peace deal with the Taliban, was not able to focus on Central Asia on its own merits.⁶³

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, during his meeting with Central Asian counterparts at the February 2020 meeting in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, called for the regional states to adopt a tougher stance towards China for its human rights violations and not be over dependent upon Chinese industrial exports.⁶⁴ There were again no serious attempts to improve relations with Central Asian partners that would enhance their ability to withstand pressures from Russia and China. Even under the Biden administration, when Secretary Antony Blinken attended the C5+1 group meeting, the conversations were in the context of the final stages of the withdrawal from Afghanistan. In a one-on-one meeting with Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister Mukhtar Tleuberdi, Blinken asked for Nur-Sultan's support for Afghanistan in the aftermath of the U.S. pullout.

Separately—but in the same vein of increased economic and diplomatic security—Nur-Sultan seeks to develop a regional cooperation body for the five Central Asian 'Stans, along the lines of the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).⁶⁵ Strengthening intra-regional ties is all the more critical because of the emerging situation in Afghanistan, increasing competition between the U.S. and China, and now the conflict in Ukraine.



*In an oil and gas field in the Mangistau region of Kazakhstan.
Photo: Pavel Mikheyev/Shutterstock.com*

KAZAKHSTAN ON THE HOME FRONT

Though annual trade between the U.S. and Kazakhstan, around \$2 billion, remains modest, in September 2020, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce launched the U.S.-Kazakhstan Business Council, geared towards significantly enhancing the economic relationship.⁶⁶ The corporate chair of USKZBC is held by Chevron, the largest American investor in Central Asia's wealthiest economy, which will be the vanguard of some 700 American firms doing business in the country. Goldman Sachs and Nasdaq provided financial assistance for the Astana International Financial Center.

American cumulative FDI is over \$53 billion, which amounts to an impressive 15 percent of the total amount of foreign capital that has been invested since the country's independence. U.S. firms are operating across a wide range of sectors including energy, petrochemical, mining, engineering, construction, transport, agriculture, and IT. Though Kazakhstan's economy has experienced noteworthy diversification, it remains highly dependent on oil and gas, which account for 75 percent of all exports and 35 percent of GDP.⁶⁷ Mining accounts for about 14 percent of GDP, whereas minerals and metals make up 16 percent of exports by value.

On one hand, the energy sector has shaped the country's tremendous growth. On the other, it renders the country vulnerable to global vicissitudes in demand. COVID-19, for example, led to a slump in energy prices, where growth fell from 4.5 percent in 2019 to 2.7 percent last year.⁶⁸ The pandemic has put a damper on any efforts towards a green economy. An energy price rebound in the wake of the Russian-Ukraine war will further

hamper economic diversification efforts, as the development of new oil and gas resources becomes more profitable.

That said, the country will have to prepare for when, in the decades ahead, investments in and demand for alternative energy sources will greatly increase. Kazakhstan can benefit from this shift through the extraction of critical minerals and rare earth elements (REE) needed to produce hi-tech components such as semi-conductors, solar panels, and batteries for electric vehicles.⁶⁹ German, Japanese, and French firms have been investing in the country's REE sector. The country's first REE facility is being built in the northern town of Stepnogorsk.

The U.S. has also been significantly involved in the country's educational sector, in an effort to improve human capital. A key example of this is the Bolashak Presidential Scholarship Program, which is behind Kazakhstan's success in attracting investors and building international partnerships.⁷⁰ Recipients of the award can obtain higher education overseas on the condition that they return for at least five years to work in their native country. The U.S., United Kingdom, Germany, and Russia are the most popular countries among Bolashak scholars pursuing degrees in business, international law, international relations, and the STEM disciplines. In the past 28 years as many as 13,000 Kazakh students have received this scholarship and 31 out of the 83 participating universities are American. Bolashak is a strong indicator of Kazakhstan's drive to join the global community, even as it is landlocked and stuck between Russia and China.

In January of this year, the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation announced it would invest \$1 billion across various sectors. In 2020, U.S. investments valued \$36 billion, of which \$33 billion were in natural resource extraction, with finance and insurance sectors and professional services and technology at a distant \$974.1 million and \$509.1 million, respectively. China, on the other hand, since President Xi Jinping unveiled the BRI in a speech in Kazakhstan, has pumped \$27 billion in some 50-plus projects—half of it in oil and gas projects.⁷¹

Oil exports account for 44 percent of Kazakhstan's budget. In 2019, U.S. firms produced 30 percent of all oil production in the country. China's three firms CNPC, Sinopec, and CITIC produced 17 percent. Accounting for 3 percent of crude extraction, Russia's Lukoil was in a distant third place.⁷²

The U.S. is well behind both China and Russia in terms of trade turnover.⁷³ In 2020, U.S. trade stood at a little under \$2 billion. China came in first place, with \$21.4 billion. Russia is a close second, with \$19 billion in trade with Kazakhstan. Machinery, aircraft, meat, tobacco, wine, and beer are the major items that the U.S. exports to Kazakhstan. The top

products that Kazakhstan exports to the U.S. include mineral fuels, iron and steel, miscellaneous grain, seeds, and fruit (soya beans).

Despite the COVID pandemic, Kazakhstan saw the influx of as much as \$3.2 billion worth of FDI, 80 percent of which came from Russia, China, and South Korea.⁷⁴ According to UNCTAD, net FDI into Kazakhstan was greater than 17 emerging and frontier economies. Inflows increased by 35 percent last year to \$3.9 billion, largely in mining, transportation, financial services, telecommunications, and energy sectors. Transit of goods through the country increased 17 percent.⁷⁵

In a September 1, 2021, address, President Tokayev said that his country had been able to weather the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic because of low public debt and significant reserves. Proactive measures by the Kazakh government—particularly the delivery of a massive stimulus package equivalent to 9 percent of GDP in May 2020—paired with strong existing social safety nets helped blunt the impact of the pandemic.⁷⁶ Over the last decade, unemployment has remained steady, averaging 4.9 percent.⁷⁷ The World Bank predicts that Kazakhstan’s economy will grow by 3 percent this year and 3.7 in 2022.

These metrics track with Kazakhstan’s ambitious 2050 Strategy, which aims to promote economic growth and make the country one of the world’s top 30 economies by that date.⁷⁸ The country will need greater U.S. involvement in order to achieve this objective. Washington can help Nur-Sultan secure membership in the Organization Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). At the same time, though, Washington will need to establish closer ties with Kazakhstan and the wider Central Asian region in order to deal with the geostrategic challenges that can disrupt Kazakhstan’s 30-year trajectory.



Kazakhstan must now deal with the fall out from the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.
Photo: Trent Inness /Shutterstock.com

KAZAKHSTAN'S DIFFICULT ROAD AHEAD

Biden's hasty pullout from Afghanistan and the ensuing security vacuum has the potential to undermine the gains Kazakhstan has made over the past 30 years.⁷⁹ Kazakhstan will need all the help it can get from the U.S. (and vice-versa) in dealing with a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Of course, the manner in which Washington's departure unfolded undermines its credibility. That said, the Kazakhs have known for a long time that the U.S. was going to exit. More importantly, they know that they cannot simply rely on Russia and China to manage the situation. They are also well aware of the need for a post-withdrawal mechanism deal with the region. Here is where U.S. and Kazakh interests overlap considerably. Now that the U.S. has retreated from the war-ravaged country, it will become an arena for competing regional players. Their moves to secure their own interests will have destabilizing effect on the surrounding regions. Washington can leverage Kazakhstan's multi-vector policy to improve Nur-Sultan's ability to sustain and enhance national and regional sovereignty.

Central Asia is caught between two competing sets of geopolitical influences. From the north, Kazakhstan represents a model of how regional states can pursue modernization. To the south, an Afghanistan under Taliban control represents a counter to that development process.⁸⁰ At the very least, a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan threatens to undermine any efforts by Kazakhstan to steer the region towards stability and prosperity.

For the better part of the past decade, since the Obama administration began the withdrawal process from Afghanistan, Kazakhstan and the Central Asian region as a whole has

been in a state of trepidation, increasingly concerned over what kind of conditions Washington would leave behind and the potential for the diffusion of instability northwards. For the longest time, Nur-Sultan's approach has been to work closely with Washington and Kabul. With the disastrous U.S. exit and the rapid collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the Central Asian nations—like all other stakeholders—are scrambling to deal with the war-torn country to their south.⁸¹

Washington is now working through various regional actors to manage Afghanistan as it moves to dealing with a rising China and violent Russia.⁸² Certainly, Afghanistan is a far greater problem for regional hegemony Russia and China, given their geographic proximity. But it is still very much in the U.S. interest not to allow the instability to spread to Central and South Asia. In both cases, U.S. engagement with Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan, will be crucial. After a 20-year period, Washington is returning to its earlier way of dealing with Afghanistan via regional actors, along the lines of how it dealt with the Soviet intervention in the 1980s by working with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

What we will not see is the U.S. washing its hands of the country as it did in 1989, when the Soviets withdrew their forces. That decision enabled the chaos of the 1990s, which gave birth to the Taliban and al-Qaeda and forced Washington into the longest war in American history. Indeed, the U.S. will continue to work through allied and partner nations. This would be in keeping with the doctrine of letting regional actors take the lead in managing security of their respective strategic contexts, which has been in the making since the earliest days of the Obama administration, furthered by President Trump, and now used by the Biden White House.⁸³

The downside to this doctrine is that it complicates the U.S. move to refocus its foreign policy on dealing with near-peer competitors and other adversarial states. In the case of Afghanistan, and by extension, Central Asia, it gives Russia, China, and Iran a great deal of room to maneuver.⁸⁴ Here is where Kazakhstan's role as a unique U.S. partner becomes even more important. Of course, initially it will involve crisis management. But there will be positive developments—a function of latent factors to build off of.

For starters, though the U.S. withdrawal has led to the worst-case scenario in the form of the Taliban overwhelming its opponents, for the first time in over 40 years one side has emerged victorious in the Afghan battlespace. Ever since the 1979 Soviet military intervention to support a fledgling communist regime facing an Islamist insurgency, the country has ceaselessly moved through different wars.⁸⁵ The communist-Islamist war continued for three years after the Soviet pullout and the 1992 fall of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) regime immediately led to a four-year intra-Islamist war, the crucible out of which the Taliban emerged. Even during the Taliban's last stint in power (1996–2001), the country remained in a state of conflict because the jihadist militia—despite controlling some 90 percent of the country—continued to battle its Northern

Alliance opponents. This was the situation when the 9/11 attacks took place, triggering the generation-long U.S. intervention. For the first time, one side has dominated the country militarily, which has increased the prospects for a durable cessation of hostilities, at least for a while.⁸⁶

While the Taliban seizure of power entails huge geopolitical risks, it has produced a window of opportunity to try and put together a durable (even if highly flawed) political dispensation. While the U.S. utterly failed to produce a modern regime with staying power, Washington did leave behind a fairly energetic civil society largely composed of young people aspiring for a better life. Afghanistan also has the potential for large-scale agricultural production, possesses large deposits of mineral wealth, and can serve as a trade and energy transit state connecting Central and South Asia.⁸⁷

For too long Afghanistan has been dealt with as a stand-alone conflict with a loose tether to Pakistan and, by extension, to South Asia. The country has been imagined by the American foreign policy establishment as more linked to the Middle East than Central Asia, with which it shares a long border. It is time to deal with the country from the vantage point of Central Asia. In sharp contrast with its eastern periphery with Pakistan, which has been the source of conflict dating back to the 1960s, its northern and northwestern border with Central Asia has the potential to serve as a “belt of prosperity.”⁸⁸

As the natural leader of Central Asia, Kazakhstan will have to lead a regional effort to deal with a post-American and Talibanized Afghanistan. Besides, the other four Central Asian states are much weaker in terms of their capabilities to deal with the situation. Nur-Sultan taking a lead role is something that Moscow would welcome, considering that it seeks to insulate its own areas from any regional spillover from Afghanistan. Moreover, Afghanistan has dropped to near the bottom of the Kremlin’s priority list, with all attention focused on the invasion of its western neighbor. China, no longer able to rely on the U.S. presence as a guarantor of stability, will need to work with new partners to secure its BRI investments in both Pakistan and Central Asia.⁸⁹

Of course, the heavy lifting will have to be done by Pakistan (as the state with the most influence in Afghanistan and over the Taliban) as well as Iran.⁹⁰ Islamabad, however, cannot contain the spillover across Afghanistan’s northern and northwestern borders. In general terms, the Pakistanis realize they cannot manage the situation in that they face dire economic conditions and are vulnerable. This would explain why the head of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence directorate organized the September 11, 2021, regional confab with his counterparts from Iran, Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.⁹¹

Of course, the U.S. will continue to work with Afghanistan’s traditional stakeholders, which include Pakistan, India, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. But

when it comes to Central Asian security, Washington will have to work more closely with Nur-Sultan. Kazakhstan is certainly well placed to play this role, from both an intent and capability point of view. The Kazakhs cannot accept a situation where their smaller Central Asian neighbors experience a spillover of instability from Afghanistan.⁹² It would threaten not just the regional objectives of Nur-Sultan but risk undermining the gains it has made on the home front. In addition, Kazakhstan's impressive international diplomacy track record shows it is prepared to play a long-term leading role in dealing with Afghanistan, of course with close U.S. cooperation and support.

The U.S. can certainly benefit from Kazakhstan's involvement in the international conversations on how to influence the behavior of Afghanistan's new Taliban rulers. A strong Muslim-majority country, the Central Asian giant can act as a model of political economic development and potentially help steer the Taliban regime away from radical politics and geopolitics. In a gradual manner, Kazakhstan can help in various sectors, along the lines of what it was providing to the collapsed Afghan state.⁹³ As a Muslim nation that has made extensive progress in its transition towards becoming a modern, prosperous state, Kazakhstan enjoys a "best of both worlds" situation.

The threat from Afghanistan remains transnational terrorism, which was a function of the Taliban regime in the 1990s, allowing al-Qaeda to use Afghanistan as a springboard to launch the 9/11 attacks. Though terrorism remains a substantial threat, the Taliban regime itself represents an even greater danger in that it appeals to Islamist and even broader Muslim sensibilities as a model of successful resistance against Western efforts to impose a social, political, and economic order. While Kazakhstan, given its location and far more favorable economic conditions, is not as much at risk as the other four Central Asian states, which are quite vulnerable, given their domestic political conditions.⁹⁴ Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan are most susceptible, given their poverty, young and growing Muslim population, and long borders with Afghanistan. There is a reason why Uzbekistan is going out of its way to assist the Taliban provisional authority, in the hope that doing so will render the emirate dependent upon Tashkent, which the latter can use to manage a Talibanized Afghanistan.⁹⁵

It will be exceedingly difficult for the Taliban movement, given its extreme Islamist ideology, to govern Afghanistan, which requires leaders to behave pragmatically in order to secure cooperation from the outside world. At the same time, however, they realize that if they are to consolidate their battlespace gains in the form of a stable polity, they will need all the assistance they can get from the outside world.⁹⁶ The international community, especially Western nations, face many obstacles to dealing with Taliban emirate 2.0. That said, the last thing we need is for the Taliban to go down the path of the Islamic Republic of Iran, exporting its ideology and helping like-minded non-state actors in the surrounding

regions. Pakistan is a key example of a nation that, despite being a patron of the Taliban, is threatened by the movement's influence on its soil. Islamabad will be struggling to sustain its Islamic republic with an Islamic emirate on much of its porous western flank with inroads into society as well as the state.

That the Taliban, in sharp contrast with Iran, is highly dependent upon outside assistance, represents a major opportunity to prevent its emirate from contaminating the region's geopolitics.⁹⁷ This dependency needs to be fully exploited through selective and targeted engagement. As a state that has reaped the economic dividends of choosing the path of international cooperation, Kazakhstan can assist the Taliban in ways that other Muslim nations cannot. Nur-Sultan can become a major U.S. partner helping Washington deal with Afghanistan from a distance.

Kazakhstan can thus help protect its Central Asian neighbors from the deleterious effects of an Afghanistan where the Taliban is—more or less—left to its own devices. Nur-Sultan does not have to do it alone; in fact, it will need to work with Tashkent, Ashgabat, and Dushanbe. A Taliban regime dependent on its Central Asian neighbors for its survival is less likely to undermine the region.⁹⁸ If and when Kazakhstan and its Central Asian partners arrive at a relatively stable *modus vivendi* with a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan, it can create the circumstances for trade and connectivity with Pakistan, India, and the Indian Ocean basin region.

By assuming a proactive leadership role in the efforts to manage a Talibanized Afghanistan, Kazakhstan can help shape a balance of power in the region that can check both Russian moves and China's efforts. Conversely, Kazakhstan finding itself in a reactive situation because of Afghanistan would allow Moscow and Beijing greater room to play in Central Asia. In addition to these two great powers, Iran is another player that is using the instability in Afghanistan to its advantage, as it has done in the Middle East.⁹⁹ Turkey is also seeking to expand its presence in Afghanistan as a gateway to developing a sphere of influence in Central Asia.

Afghanistan, after 20 years of American intervention, is thus a magnet for several powers with differing interests to shape—either directly or indirectly—the regional landscape.¹⁰⁰ What this does is put the gains made by Kazakhstan, with close assistance from the U.S., at risk. Thus far, Afghanistan has been treated as extraneous to Central Asia; now it cannot be. Certainly, there is no returning to a pre-9/11 era, but the U.S. must return to a level of engagement with Kazakhstan similar to what it had in the first decade following the latter's emergence as a sovereign nation, a process that was disrupted by the post-9/11 wars. The U.S. was unable to preserve its 20-year investment in building a durable Afghan state. But Washington can still build upon its 30-year relationship with Kazakhstan.





*Russia invades Ukraine.
Photo: Seneline/
shutterstock.com*

CONCLUSION

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 will be remembered as a watershed in the country's troubled history and in its relations with the U.S. and the West. Regardless of the outcome of President Putin's military aggression disguised as a peace-keeping operation, the Kremlin has managed to do irreparable harm to its relationship with the West. The ramifications of these actions as they pertain to the post-Soviet space—including Kazakhstan—will also be historic.

Putin has succeeded in achieving all of Moscow's worst fears in one fell swoop: a world galvanized against Russia; a newly united and motivated Europe; unprecedented support for NATO across Europe (and Ukraine); German rearmament; crushing sanctions, including frozen currency reserves; isolation from global markets; rapidly falling energy revenues (with buyers desperately seeking alternatives); and a Ukraine now irreversibly oriented towards the West.

Putin's gross miscalculations—and his subsequent ostracization from the global community—will be without a doubt the most significant test for Nur-Sultan's multi-vector foreign policy approach. Open and balanced engagement with Russia is no longer possible, regardless of intent, due to international perception. Kazakhstan will likely be forced to choose sides, at least publicly, though geographic, economic, and security realities will necessitate certain levels of continued cooperation with Moscow.

The future of Russia-Kazakhstan relations remains opaque, but Kazakhstan's actions since the invasion reveal a measured, albeit anti-Russian, position. While President Tokayev made public his conversations with President Putin over the need to cease hostilities and negotiate immediately (even offering Kazakhstan as a potential mediation venue), it is clear that the administration is distancing itself from Russian actions. The first sign came as Kazakhstan announced it would not recognize the two Russian-created breakaway republics in Ukraine's Donbas region, a clear break from its northern ally.¹⁰¹ The U.S. commended Kazakhstan for this position.

On March 1, in an address to the ruling party congress, Tokayev said his country's position "should proceed from the critical need to ensure the security, sovereignty and territorial integrity of our state." He said,

As the country that hosted the OSCE summit in 2010, we insist on the principle of the indivisibility of Eurasian security....The principle of indivisibility and common security stipulates mutual understanding based on mutual trust. Unfortunately, this has not happened. The Minsk agreements remained only on paper, which led to the military operations on the territory of Ukraine... There is no other way. A bad peace is better than a good war. Without peace, there will be no development. Kazakhstan, for its part, is ready to provide all possible assistance, including intermediary services, if, of course, they are required.¹⁰²

We can expect Kazakhstan to attempt to maintain its neutrality for as long as possible, but global momentum against Russia may make this position untenable. If Moscow succeeds in alienating its Central Asian allies, there may be a new opportunity for U.S. engagement in the region. But this situation is fraught with risk and uncertainty.

Indeed, Kazakhstan has its work cut out for itself. Its growing international engagements on a variety of fronts (Syrian negotiations, Iranian nuclear talks, combating violent extremism), however, has prepared it for the challenges ahead.¹⁰³ In the short- to medium-term, its goal will be to prevent a spillover of instability from Afghanistan and navigate its now-perilous relationship with Russia, all while healing from the scars of the January crisis. The U.S. can and should find ways to support its longtime friend as it pursues these important (and shared) goals. A new era of U.S.-Kazakhstan relations is unfolding, but it will require proactive steps from both sides to secure another 30 years of mutually beneficial relations.

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