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KAZAKHSTAN AMID UNREST AND INSTABILITY: MAIN IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract: *This paper explores the reasoning and implications of the unrest in Kazakhstan unleashed in January of 2022. This crisis was the most severe form of violence that Kazakhstan has endured since gaining independence. It distorted Kazakhstan's image as a stable country. While the crisis was limited to the territory of Kazakhstan and developed mainly from domestic problems, it undeniably acquired an important international element. Kazakhstan's appeal to the CSTO presented a drastic change in Kazakhstan's foreign policy and ensued in the shift in the balance of power in the greater Eurasian region. Although Russia played a relatively subtle role on the ground, Russia's involvement was set to link the political future of Kazakhstan to Russia for an unspecified amount of time. The study concludes that Kazakhstan is faced with the challenges of undertaking significant reforms to lower the possibility of further instabilities while remaining true to its multi-vector foreign policy agenda amid Russian intrusion.*

Keywords: *Kazakhstan; Unrest; CSTO; Russia; Reforms*

INTRODUCTION

The 2019 leadership change in Kazakhstan, entailing the long-time President Nursultan Nazarbayev stepping down, invited opportunities for genuine reforms toward democratization. The newly-elected incumbent President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has promised these reformations and asserted his commitment to maintaining the 'listening state' approach, which effectively responds to all constructive requests of its citizens. Meanwhile, despite numerous calls for systemic reforms, President Tokayev has appeared to maintain continuity as the former ruling elite retained significant levers of power.

In January 2022, Kazakhstan faced an unprecedented crisis. The popular uprising, although incited by the rise of gas prices, has roots that run much more profoundly. The lingering frustration over a wide array of issues, including social and economic disparities, informal patronage networks, and the unfulfilled promises of reforms, has prompted the outbreak of civil unrest. Though the crisis was addressed rather quickly and was soon overshadowed by the events in Ukraine, it has severe political and socio-economic implications.

Beyond Kazakhstan, the crisis has attracted the attention of the wider region, including neighboring countries Russia and China, as well as the Western powers. President Tokayev's appeal to the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to impede the violence represented a substantial change to Kazakhstan's foreign policy. It was unprecedented for Kazakhstan and the CSTO, which had never deployed a similar mission before.

This paper specifically addresses the following questions:

1. What issues triggered the crisis of 2022?
2. What are the major foreign policy implications of the crisis?

CONTINUITY IN CHANGE

Kazakhstan has a long history of standing amongst the region's countries for the ambitious goals set by its leaders. In 1997, Kazakhstan's first President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, launched the vision 'Kazakhstan 2030' as a roadmap for the country's development. In 2012, he went even further and announced the 'Kazakhstan 2050' program - a strategic vision designed to pursue the goal of joining the 30 most advanced countries in the world in terms of a wide range of economic, social, environmental and institutional measurements. These initiatives shared a common feature: they prioritized economic development while being very 'modest' regarding political reforms. The model of the country's development was primarily based on using rich natural resources to build a modern economy capable of strengthening the middle-class (Cornell 2021, 12).

As it pertains to the general terms of its goals, this model succeeded. Still, it was built on a social contract, with citizens trading their rights and political freedoms for more favorable economic conditions. While the former President had outlined ambitious visions for Kazakhstan as one of the world's most developed states by the mid-century, international directories pointed to the low progress of the country in terms of the rule of law, accountability, control over corruption, etc. (Cornell 2022, 4).

Consistent with the ruling elites' authoritarian strategies to legitimize in oil-rich countries, Nazarbayev would attribute the persisting economic and political shortcomings to external factors, such as dwindling oil prices, geopolitical crises, global fluctuations, etc. (Terzyan 2020).

Reform initiatives in the political sphere commenced after the election of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, a long-time foreign minister of Kazakhstan. Initially, Tokayev abandoned the slogan of Nazarbayev 'economy first' in favor of changes in politics and the economy in a parallel track. The main slogan of the new policy was the increase in participation in the political and social life of the country (Pachucki-Włosek 2022, 235). President Tokayev has promised to build a 'listening state', committed to delivering reforms that would improve freedoms and make the government more responsive. Nevertheless, genuine reforms were never actually implemented.

Despite Nazarbayev having left the presidency, it is widely believed that he has not left power. This process resembled 'a managed-designation transition' (Blackmon 2020), with Nazarbayev still being a decision-maker in Kazakh policy. He continued to hold the title of Elbasi, leader of the nation, remained head of the Nur Otan party, was proclaimed as the lifelong head of the National Security Council, continued to represent Kazakhstan on the world stage,

and possessed far-reaching powers to appoint the leading state officials (Isaacs 2020, 2). The reforms initiated by President Tokayev were mostly symbolic or surface-level. The establishment of the National Council of Public Trust in mid-2019 was among the major achievements on the path of a more 'listening state'. It was aimed to engage civil society more closely in policymaking. The Council, however, was formed with no clear criteria for the inclusion of members, and the degree of public involvement in genuine decision-making remained somewhat limited (BTI 2022). Other modifications set forth the articles in the Criminal Code on libel and incitement of hatred, election and party registration procedures, and introduced the notion of a 'parliamentary opposition'.

Meanwhile, informal inter-elite decision-making continued to substitute formal political competition. Kazakhstan's bicameral Parliament remained monopolized by the former President's Nur Otan party, with two other pro-government parties creating the appearance of an opposition (Freedom House 2021). Thus, the reforms were primarily assessed as 'declarative' with no substantive democratic changes.

As it concerns human rights, Kazakhstan has always portrayed itself as a stronghold of interethnic peace, whereas, in reality, the society and the state have become ethnically 'more Kazakh' in the years after its independence. Throughout his presidency, Nazarbayev was actively promoting the idea of inter-ethnic tolerance as an essential principle. Meanwhile, since the first days of Kazakhstan's independence, its government had to balance the nationalist demands for increased 'kazakhization' and the rights of ethnic minorities (Daminov 2021). Before 2022, the most severe episodes of human rights abuse and interethnic violence in Kazakhstan were related to miners' protests in the Western part in 2011. To advance their interests and play a more significant role in controlling Kazakhstan's resource-based development and financial flows, regional criminal-political actors weaponized peaceful protests by striking oil workers. At least sixteen unarmed protesters were killed and dozens injured due to police fire (Markowitz and Omelicheva 2021, 13).

Nazarbayev's resignation seemed to create a window of opportunity to improve the country's troubling human rights record. 'Different views, but one nation' was an encouraging slogan the new incumbent voiced on his inauguration day (Bohr *et al.* 2019, 38).

Since 2019, Kazakhstan has been working with the Council of Europe on sectoral improvements in human rights and the rule of law. In September 2020, Kazakhstan signed the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, committing to abolish the death penalty. On June 2021, President Tokayev signed a decree 'On further measures of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the field of human rights'. The international community positively received the plan. It includes the liberalization of religious legislation, the abolition of the death penalty, policies designed for women's empowerment, etc. (The Astana Times 2022).

Regardless of some positive mobility in reforms, no consequential improvements occurred. A more recent outbreak of interethnic tensions took place in Southern Kazakhstan, where Dungans - members of a local Muslim ethnic minority of Chinese origin - were attacked by Kazakhs. Eleven people were killed, close to 200 were injured, and 20,000 people were reportedly displaced, having fled over the border to Kyrgyzstan (Freedom in the World 2021). Although it was widely believed to happen on ethnic grounds (Freedom in the World 2021), the

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government characterized it as a brawl between Dungans and local Kazakh policemen during a traffic incident (Markowitz and Omelicheva 2021, 14). The concept of a nation-state remains widely accepted within Kazakhstani society. The authorities continue to cater mainly to the Kazakh ethnic majority, which accounted for almost 68.5% of the total population in early 2020, up from 63.1% in 2009 and 53.4% in 1999. Meanwhile, the share of ethnic Russians decreased from 23.7% in 2009 to 18.9% by early 2020 (BTI 2022).

In January 2021, Kazakhstan held its parliamentary elections, in which the ruling Nur Otan party retained its qualified majority in Mazhilis. The OSCE/ODHIR election monitoring mission concluded that the elections were "technically prepared efficiently" but "lacked genuine competition" and that the electoral process needed reform (HRW 2022). Kazakh authorities have continued their multi-year crackdown on government critics, targeting with criminal prosecution perceived or actual members of banned 'extremist' groups, including those participating in peaceful rallies. Courts convicted dozens of people in 2021, subjecting them to restrictions, including multi-year bans on engaging in political activities (HRW 2022). Thus, limited political reforms, persistent suppression of opposition and civil society members, and continued inter-ethnic tensions signaled a lack of genuine intention to promote systemic democratic changes. Moreover, economic hardships, aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic, caused social dissatisfaction, and, to make things worse, a sharp increase in the cost of liquefied petroleum gas resulted in civil unrest.

THE OUTBREAK OF CRISIS IN 2022 AND ITS INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

Overall, in recent years there has been a rise in protests in Kazakhstan. The city of Zhanaozen, where the January wave began, was the site of months of labor unrest in 2011 that ended when security forces shot and killed sixteen strikers. However, as the Oxus Society Protest Tracker documents (Central Asia Protest Tracker), demonstrations have become more frequent across Kazakhstan since 2014. They have been catalyzed by various issues, from the environment and politics to pensions and social support payments (ICG 2022).

A hike in the price of natural gas led to popular demonstrations that started on 2 January in Western Kazakhstan and overgrew in scope and focus. By 4 January, demonstrations in Almaty escalated. They soon changed character and included violent attacks on state institutions. In just a few days, Kazakhstan witnessed a 'massive crisis', the worst in over 30 years of independence, as President himself called it (The Astana Times 2022). President Tokayev branded the protesters as 'terrorists', threatening more force and shutting down communications (International Crisis Group 2022). In a televised address, Tokayev warned demonstrators would be 'destroyed' as part of a forceful 'counterterrorist' operation. In almost a week of protests, dozens have been killed, including citizens and police (Aljazeera 2022).

Although any opposition leader or political party has not united protesters, they included comparatively well-organized oil workers in Zhanaozen, Aktau, Aktobe and Atyrau, coal miners in Karaganda and copper smelters in Zhezkazgan, as well as liberal activists in Almaty. The protest was not centered on the topic of gas prices alone. The crisis came amid rising labor and occasional ethnic unrest in the country (Stronski2022). The protesters have various demands and grievances. Some of them were there to decry inflation. Others condemned the shortage of jobs.

Still, others were concerned with various related challenges: inequality of opportunity, corruption, injustice, lack of benefits, fuel prices, low wages, etc. In the meantime, their one unifying message was "Shal, ket!" or "Old man, get out!" (International Crisis Group 2022). This slogan referred to former President Nazarbayev, who maintained control over certain aspects of political and economic life.

For most of the past decade, the official rhetoric of Kazakhstan's leadership has not coincided with the perceived reality of much of the country's population. While Kazakhstan saw uninterrupted improvement in the standard of living in the 2000s, this is no longer true (Cornell 2022, 3). The unfulfilled promises of reforms initially voiced by Tokayev, the frustration with the leadership transition (which kept the old guard in place), and the economic stagnation provoked the crisis. The transfer of formal political power was not accompanied by any transfer of informal political and economic power, as is characteristic of post-Soviet societies.

Tokayev's initial efforts to suppress the demonstration, warning of 'tough' repercussions and suggesting protesters were funded by outside forces, fuelled public anger even more (Stronski 2022). On 5 January, Tokayev appealed to the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, invoking Article 4 of the Russia-led CSTO Treaty, a mutual defense clause comparable to NATO's Article 5. Within hours, a 'peacekeeping operation' was sent to Kazakhstan. The CSTO's other members - Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan - also send token contingents of between seventy and 500 troops. This is the bloc's first real engagement since its founding in 1999 (Trenin 2022). As experts argue (Lukyanov 2022), before the case of Kazakhstan, no oil-rich, highly educated country with vast territory had to seek its neighbors' military help to deal with street protests. Article 4 of the CSTO Treaty states that an act of aggression (an armed attack that threatens security, stability, territorial integrity, and sovereignty) against one member state will be considered a collective act of aggression on all member states of the CSTO. To justify his decision in the eyes of the public and to bring in military support under the Treaty, Tokayev branded the demonstrators as foreign terrorists (Aljazeera 2022). Therefore, Tokayev's narrative that foreign terrorist was behind the violence played a fundamental role in securing official support from the CSTO.

A far more plausible explanation for the appeal to the CSTO was that Tokayev could no longer trust the KNB and had serious doubts about other law enforcement bodies (Pannier 2022, 16). With reports of security forces moving to the protesters' side, he may have feared he would lose control of the situation in the streets. This explains why he could not even deploy a relatively small, rapid intervention force entirely of Kazakhstani personnel. The CSTO assistance may have been planned to buy time to appoint trusted allies in key security positions (ICG 2022).

The appeal to CSTO can be regarded as a double-edged sword; it allowed Tokayev and his allies to preserve power, meanwhile linking Kazakhstan's political future to Russian President Vladimir Putin, who helped deliver the commencement of the Tokayev era (Anceschi 2022). Since President Tokayev is the most associated with multi-vector foreign policy, such a step could not have been taken so effortlessly. Meanwhile, some major events have already demonstrated the decline in American and European influence in Central Asia and South Caucasus. The United States was a bystander during the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in late 2020. The chaotic American withdrawal from Afghanistan epitomized American disengagement, and finally, the United States did not feature in any unique way during the crisis

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in Kazakhstan (Cornell 2022). It simply urged the authorities to respond appropriately and proportionately while protecting the rights of the protesters and questioning the necessity of appealing to the CSTO (US Department of State 2022). The Kazakh authorities "certainly can deal appropriately with protests (…) So it's not clear why they feel the need for any outside assistance. So we're trying to learn more about it", said the US Secretary of State" (BBC 2022).

Interestingly, China supported the CSTO in assisting Kazakhstan, with no role attributed to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which had been viewed as the main arena for security cooperation in Central Asia (Global Times 2022). Due to its geostrategic location, Kazakhstan is often referred to as the "buckle" in China's One Belt One Road Initiative (Laruelle 2018, 100). The passive stance of China confirmed the narrative on the division of labor between these two powers in Central Asia: Russia is responsible for security, and China is in charge of the economy. Preserving its influence in the South China Sea is far more important to Beijing than showcasing its power in Central Asia (Stronski and Ng 2018). Meanwhile, on 10 January, before Tokayev announced a phased withdrawal of CSTO troops, China offered its security assistance. President Xi Jinping asserted that China resolutely opposed any foreign force destabilizing Kazakhstan and engineered a "color revolution" (Reuters 2022).

Considering the 30-year history of CSTO's inaction, it is imperative to address why Moscow agreed to deploy troops in Kazakhstan. First, during that period, Moscow has grown ever more nervous about street protests at home and in neighboring countries, such as those that resulted in the ouster of Ukraine's former President Victor Yanukovych in 2014 and those that demanded the removal of Belarus' Oleksandr Lukashenko since 2020 (International Crisis Group 2022). Therefore, the deployment of troops was used as a legitimate step to stop the rise of a similar movement in Kazakhstan. Second, it was a major coup for President Putin in portraying the CSTO as a Eurasian counterpart to NATO, capable of providing aid to regional leaders who pose domestic and external threats to their power. Relatedly, helping Tokayev signified submerging him in Moscow's debt in the long run, despite the country's claims of a multi-vector foreign policy.

The deployment of troops was also a clear message to other states of Central Asia in addressing security threats. This mainly refers to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, neither of which are CSTO members but share a border with Afghanistan. Not once have Kremlin officials warned the Central Asian authorities about the threat from militant groups and reminded the two countries that they might need help in defending their borders (Pannier 2022, 16-17).

Furthermore, the CSTO military intervention targeted Turkish plans to expand the Organization of Turkic States, which promotes diplomatic, cultural, economic, and security cooperation between Ankara and Central Asian capitals, as well as the expansion of Turkish business interests in the region. Turkey convened an urgent meeting of the Organization of Turkic States regarding the situation in Kazakhstan, but the group's diplomatic response tools are limited (Cohen, 2022). Against the backdrop of strengthening cooperation (in particular, militarily) between these two countries, Kazakhstan's choice to appeal to the CSTO instead of the Organization of the Turkic States (OTS) indicates a symbolic connotation.

Although Russia's intervention in the conflict attracted much attention, its actual role on the ground was somewhat limited and low-risk, designed more for its reputational

improvement. Nevertheless, the CSTO managed to prove that it was capable of transporting forces quickly to a country under threat.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE CRISIS AND PROMISES OF NEW REFORMS

Kazakhstan's image as a somewhat stable country in the region was shattered due to the crisis. Specifically, the international community harshly criticized Tokayev's order to shoot-to-kill without warning. The UN human rights experts called on the Kazakhstan authorities and security forces to halt their unrestrained use of force, including lethal force. They also reminded Kazakhstan of its positive momentum in moving towards a more open and accountable government in recent years and urged restraint and a recommitment to human rights and the rule of law (UN Human Rights Council 2022). On 19 January, the European Parliament passed a resolution (2022) calling for sanctions against government officials and "condemning President Tokayev's inflammatory rhetoric, including his portrayal of the protesters as 'terrorists'" (European Parliament news 2022).

As to the President himself, in tactical terms, Tokayev has emerged from the crisis as a victor, but in strategic terms, his position is far from straightforward. His popularity with the public is doubtful. Despite all his attempts to distance himself from the discredited circles of Nazarbayev, people have not forgotten that Tokayev is part of that entourage and that the former President chose him to succeed him (Umarov and Gabuev 2022). In addition, appealing for external help is a major loss of face for any government.

As to economic implications, since the period of unrest was short, did not entail long strikes, and was focused on the country's west and Almaty, economic losses were minimal. It did force the increase of oil and uranium prices. In the long run and depending on other political and economic events in Kazakhstan, including reform efforts, the events of January 2022 are likely to affect the investment climate (The Diplomat 2022).

Regionally, the international response to the Kazakh crisis illustrated the shifting balance of power in Kazakhstan and greater Eurasia, with Russia strengthening its reputation in the region.

A month after the protests, Tokayev announced his slogan, 'Let's Build a New Kazakhstan Together!' and promised new democratic reforms in the country, which included replacing officials on different levels across the nation. He dismissed the government to regain public support and restore calm and walked back the gas-price increase (Stronski 2022). By reversing price hikes and promising to deal with the severe economic inequalities in Kazakhstan, the government has acknowledged the legitimate nature of the grievances behind the protests that swept the country (Cornell 2022, 2).

In the aftermath of the crisis, Tokayev has also reduced the influence of former President Nazarbayev's family and associates in the country's politics and economy while promising to hasten the speed of political reforms. On 6 January, he removed former President Nazarbayev as chair of the National Security Council and his allies from other vital positions (International Crisis Group 2022). There has even been an online petition has been launched to restore the name of the capital to Astana instead of Nur-Sultan. Tokayev also announced plans to set up a People of Kazakhstan wealth fund that would collect 'donations' from large corporations that thrived

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under Nazarbayev to pay for social services. The idea has been borrowed from its neighbor Kyrgyzstan. After President Japarov came to power in Kyrgyzstan, he pledged to help top up the state's bare coffers by forcing corrupt officials to surrender cash to avoid prosecutions (Eurasianet 2022).

A wide array of other political reforms has been further introduced. In his 16 March message to the people of Kazakhstan (State-of-the-Nation Address 2022), Tokayev proposed constitutional reforms to limit the powers of the President's office, switching from 'super presidential' rule to a presidential republic with a strong parliament. He suggested reducing the powers of the President and significantly strengthening the Parliament's role, thereby increasing the state's institutional stability. The President also highlighted the importance of the Maslikhats (local governing bodies) to increase citizens' confidence in the representative government. In addition, he suggested simplifying party registration procedures, reducing the threshold from 20,000 to 5,000 people. More importantly, he proposed that close relatives of the President be barred from holding high-ranking government posts and executive positions in the quasi-public sector.

The President asserted that the January events 'damaged Kazakhstan's international reputation' but pledged it would be rebuilt by 'hard work' (The Astana Times 2022). However, regardless of the proposed reforms, the people of Kazakhstan are now more skeptical about their realization. For some, this is merely a populist tactic to settle the citizens following the bloody riots. The re-establishment of public trust essentially depends on the success of the process of 'de-Nazarbayevication' and on whether actual reforms towards democratization will eventually be undertaken.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the crisis shattered Kazakhstan's international image as a beacon of prosperity and stability. It exhibited, amongst others, that the leadership change will not lead to considerable changes as long as informal institutions and practices persist. Regardless of Tokayev's initial promises of reforms and his commitment to 'a listening state', the social contract between the state and the society has not been broken yet. The limited nature of political reforms, the persistent repressions of opposition and civil society members, and informal patronage networks have all beckoned a lack of authentic intention to stimulate systemic democratic changes.

Although the unrest was limited to Kazakhstan, it significantly shifted the balance of power in Kazakhstan and greater Eurasia. The CSTO support was vital in keeping Tokayev in power, and, as such, it is supposed to link Kazakhstan's political future to Russia indefinitely. Furthermore, it reinforced the image of Russia as a powerful and effective force for ensuring 'regional stability' that essentially comes down to ensuring regime stability. It presented a novel opportunity for the Kremlin to portray the CSTO as the Eurasian version of NATO. The deployment of troops was a well-defined signal to other states of Central Asia (in particular, the non-CSTO members Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan sharing a border with Afghanistan), which might find themselves in future need of addressing security threats, including those pertaining to regime survival.

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