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Batalova, Akmaral

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Sonstiges / other

**Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**
Batalova, A. (2023). The objectives of the Organization of Turkic States, Russia and China are not at odds. *BRIQ Belt & Road Initiative Quarterly*, *4*(3), 62-67. https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-89252-0

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Leibniz-Institut
für Sozialwissenschaften

Mitglied der
Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

International Relations Expert

## Akmaral Batalova

# "The objectives of the Organization of Turkic States, Russia and China are not at odds"

*Akmaral Batalova is an expert on international relations, reporter and film producer. She is also the founder and Executive Director of the Al Farabi World Heritage Public Foundation. She was born in Almaty, Kazakhstan, graduated from the Mass Media Faculty of Kazakh State University, the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Diplomatic School of Madrid and has a Master's degree in International Relations from the Complutense University (Spain). Akmaral Batalova observes the situation in the Middle East, focusing on the humanitarian crisis in Syria, writes articles and makes documentaries and does humanitarian work in Syria*

How to cite: Batalova, A. (2023). The objectives of the Organization of Turkic States, Russia, and China are not at odds. (Ali Erdem Köz, Interviewer). *BRIQ Belt & Road Initiative Quarterly,* 4(3), 62-67.

**"US needs NATO as a military instrument to maintain and strengthen its global influence through military expansion. On the contrary, Asian countries are primarily interested in the stable development of their economies and are ready to cooperate economically with all countries. For this reason, I think that, in these conditions, where all the rules of the world order are violated, Asia is trying to create a safe future where the economies of the countries in the region can be balanced and the conditions for a peaceful environment can be provided, creating a center of gravity."**

**International Relations Expert Akmaral Batalova from Kazakhstan answered Ali Erdem Köz's questions.**

***The Astana Process has achieved decisive success in resolving the Syrian crisis. What do you think is the secret to the success of this model? How would you evaluate the possibility of developing this model to solve other regional problems in the future?***

**Akmaral Batalova:** Kazakhstan is a peaceful, multi-religious, multi-ethnic country with a large Muslim population. We have established friendly relations with our neighbors in the region, even in the current conditions where many negotiation platforms established in the past have lost their neutrality. Astana Garden is excellent for everyone as an impartial negotiation platform for conflict resolution. Time has shown that other formats that emerged during the protracted Syrian crisis were ineffective and unsustainable. Phrases such as "The Astana Process," "The Astana Guarantors," and "The Astana Trio" have become accepted terms in international literature when discussing issues in the Middle East.

The Astana Process for the peaceful resolution of the Syrian crisis has become a vivid example of success because, for the first time, it was possible to start direct negotiations "on the ground" between the direct parties to the conflict, the Syrian government and the armed opposition. At the same time, the guarantor countries had the opportunity to get in touch with and influence the warring parties in real terms.

I want to emphasize that the most important result of the Astana Process is the cessation of active conflict and the prevention of the deaths of many people. The agreement on creating four different ceasefire zones, signed in May 2017, helped reduce the intensity of the hostile attitude of the warring parties and spawned the process of national reconciliation.

Another feature of the Astana Process is that, for the first time in the history of international relations, negotiations for peace in the Middle East are traditionally held in the center of the Eurasian continent, not in European or Arab capitals.

The Astana format is also a unique example of how efficiently major regional actors can interact with each other: Sunni Türkiye and Shiite Iran, NATO member Ankara, and NATO rivals Moscow and Tehran.

Negotiations with the participation of parties involved in the conflicts in Syria from inside and outside played an active role in protecting Syria's territorial integrity. During the negotiation process, all guarantor countries strive not only to achieve the goals in line with their national interests but also to consider the interests of all players affected by the Syrian issue. I would like to particularly note the atmosphere of respect that the Astana format has, including the hospitality of the Kazakh side. And, of course, it makes it possible to say that this approach to resolving any crisis without imposing dominance or imposing the opinion of one side, taking into account the national interests of all participants equally, has an important place in the negotiation experience of international meetings. The Astana platform should be considered, developed, and used for further peace processes and for building a security architecture across the region.

## The Unipolar World System is Over

***The Ukraine crisis is in its 14th month. How would you evaluate the reasons and background of this crisis, which brought Russia against the US and NATO, regarding the balance of powers worldwide, the goals and objectives of the US, and the positions of Russia and China?***

**Akmaral Batalova:** I'm sure we are all aware that the conflict between Russia and the US/NATO started much earlier, not with the Ukraine crisis. President Putin's Munich speech, or rather, the reaction of Western countries to this speech, can be considered the driving force of the second Cold War. In a speech at a security conference in Germany in 2007, the Russian President said that the imposition of the unipolar model of the world, that is, the legal system of one state, namely the United States, on all other states is "not only unacceptable but also impossible" and that the only decision-making mechanism regarding the use of military force can only be the UN Treaty. He then noted that the US failure to comply with the "Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe" violated the security guarantees given by the West during the collapse of the USSR.

As you know, at the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, there was a situation of NATO expansion in three different waves towards the east, towards the borders of the Russian Federation. In 2021, Putin urged Western leaders three times to come together to discuss the rules of the game in the context of the geopolitical and geo-economic transformation of the world and proposed to create a single, indivisible security architecture for all European countries. Unfortunately, the West did not accept these initiatives of the Russian President. The US and EU also ignored the "red lines" that Moscow drew during the meeting of the two presidents, Putin and Biden, in July 2021 and the Russia-NATO and Russia-US negotiations in November and December of the same year.

Western countries perceived Putin's speech in Munich in 2007 not as a call to change the current geopolitical situation by taking into account the national interests of other states but as a challenge to the world order based on their own ideas. It is now clear that the unipolar world system is coming to an end not only because of Russia's intervention in Ukraine, but also because of the desire of other large states such as China, India, Türkiye, Brazil, South Africa, as well as the Islamic world and most of the countries in the Pacific region to strengthen their state

From the SCO meeting of foreign ministers held in India on May 5, 2023. (Xinhua, 2023)

sovereignty and ensure that their national interests are taken into account in interaction with other participants in international relations.

The world witnessed that military actions in Ukraine, actively promoted by the United States, turned into a war between Russia and the European members of NATO. If we go back to history and remember that the main causes of the First and Second World Wars were Washington's attempts to prevent a strong political and economic union between Russia and Germany, it is better understood why the war is now raging in the center of Europe and why the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline was blown up.

From the Kremlin's point of view, the US desire to deprive Russia of its Black Sea Fleet base in Sevastopol, Washington's attempts to limit Russian access to the Black Sea, and the possibility of deploying military bases in Ukraine should be mentioned. For Russia, Ukrainian territory, very close to its borders, was seen as a vital strategic security threat. Unfortunately, these concerns were not taken into account.

Thus, the intertwining of a vicious circle of mutually conflicting interests of geopolitical, regional, and local actors and the historical past led to the war that has now tragically hit the two Slavic peoples, left the entire region on its toes, and brought the world to the brink of nuclear catastrophe.

## Asia Strives to Become a Centre of Gravity for Peace and Development

***The Shanghai Cooperation Organization appears to have expanded to include countries in separate camps during and after the Cold War. In addition, global initiatives within the scope of economic cooperation, such as the BRICS, Belt and Road Initiative, are increasingly becoming centers of attraction. How would you evaluate the US's attempts to enlarge NATO and the partnership and cooperation initiatives with the center of gravity based on their opposition or parallelism with each other?***

**Akmaral Batalova:** The difference between the policies of the United States and China lies in their approaches, as you have correctly pointed out.

China uses the SCO to expand its geographic influence through economic cooperation. In addition to economic cooperation, BRICS is needed as a tool for the creation of a dollar-independent financial system and the transition to payments in national currencies by the member states.

**It would be naive to evaluate the events in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and other countries without the influence of the US.**

If we pay attention to the US strategic documents, for example, the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, and other publicly available documents, the US refers to China and Russia as their common strategic enemies. In the doctrinal documents adopted in November 2022, the entire world is referred to as the US national interest zone. According to the definition of White House strategists, the world is divided based on the threats posed by China and Russia.

In their understanding, Russia directly threatens a free and open international system by "recklessly trampling on the fundamental laws of the international order." In contrast, the PRC is the only competitor with both the intent to change the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological strength to achieve that goal. In other words, China poses the most serious and systemic challenge to the United States. In contrast, Russia poses a serious threat to its vital national interests both within the United States and abroad. Although it presents it as co-operation with a growing network of US allies and partners to achieve common goals, it is clear that the US needs NATO as a military instrument to maintain and strengthen its global influence through military expansion.

It would be naive, to say the least, to evaluate the events in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and other countries without the influence of the US. On the contrary, Asian countries are primarily interested in the stable development of their economies and are ready to cooperate economically with all countries. For this reason, I think that, in these conditions, where all the rules of the world order are violated, Asia is trying to create a safe future where the economies of the countries in the region can be balanced and the conditions for a peaceful environment can be provided, creating a center of gravity.

## OTS is the bridge between west and east, north and south

***Kazakhstan and some other Central Asian Turkic Republics are members of the Organization of Turkic States on the one hand and the SCO and the Collective Security Organization on the other. Some sections argue that the Organization of Turkic States is against Russia and China. Considering this argument, how would you evaluate the place of the Asian-centered developing world countries initiative of the Organization of Turkish States?***

**Akmaral Batalova:** Kazakhstan is an ancestral country of the Turkic world.

Therefore, it is engaged in further developing and strengthening comprehensive interaction between the peoples of other brotherly countries. In addition to the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) , the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TÜRKSOY), the Turkish Parliamentary Assembly, and the Turkic Academy were established with the initiative of Kazakhstan for the cultural and spiritual rapprochement of the Turkic peoples.

The President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, proposed, based on the creation of a "Digital Library", to mutually open the archives of Turkish countries and to prepare a "road map" for the study of the common written heritage of our peoples and to draw a road map on it in the future. We all need to examine, protect, and pass on the invaluable legacy of the ancient Turkish civilization to future generations.

It is clear that modern geopolitical and geo-economic contradictions negatively impact the economy, transport, and logistics of the Eurasian continent. It is, therefore, particularly important to help strengthen the belt of stability that unites our states today. The population of the Turkish states is approximately 150 million, and the total area of these countries exceeds 4.5 million km2. Their GDP is approximately 1.5 trillion dollars, ranking 13th in the world economy. At the same time, mutual trade between our countries constitutes only 4% of the total foreign trade volume. The rest is covered by third countries.

Therefore, at the Organization of Turkish States summit in Samarkand in September last year, it was decided to develop strategic cooperation areas such as trade and transportation. In addition, the lands of the organization's member states are a bridge between the West and the East, the North and the South. An example is the Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor, which passes over three countries of the Turkic world (Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan) and connects China with European countries. Organization of Turkish States member states are interested in increasing cargo traffic, coordinating logistics, and finding alternative routes to existing rail and road routes. For example, Kazakhstan allocated $35 billion to develop the transportation and logistics industries in the last 15 years and plans to invest another $20 billion by 2025.

As for your question about the opposition to Russia and China, I think the Organization of Turkic States is an interstate organization created to expand the interaction of Turkish-speaking countries in politics, economy, science, education, transportation, and tourism.

In my opinion, the statutes and program documents, including the "Strategy of the Organization of Turkish States" adopted for implementing the Expectations for the Turkic World 2040 program at this stage, do not conflict with China in any way. None of the activities of the Turkish world are contrary to the aims and objectives of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, nor the principles of friendship, partnership, and mutually beneficial cooperation between Russia and China. We hope this continues in the future.