

Kazakhstan's Position in the War Between Russia and Ukraine

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Key Points

- Kazakhstan maintains a relatively ambiguous position towards the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The Nur-Sultan government maintains good relations with Kiev and invites the war parties to dialogue, but at the same time refuses to condemn Russian aggression and tries to protect its own security.
- The neutrality of the Kazakh government is understandable given the country's strong tradition in the field of international relations, which is based on multi-vector foreign policy, pacifism, and cooperation within international organizations.
- While Kazakhstan has remained diplomatically neutral, its population has shown discontent towards Russia's policy in the Ukraine war. Reports show that the Kazakhs fear they may be the next post-Soviet state to be on Russia's radar.
- It is likely that Moscow does not want to put too much pressure on its Central Asian ally to solicit an eventual intervention on its side, in order not to upset Beijing, which also invests heavily in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on Kazakh territory.

INTRODUCTION

On March 1, 2022, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev took a stand on the conflict in Ukraine during the extraordinary Congress of the Amanat ruling party (via VTC): the priority in such a scenario is to guarantee the security of Kazakhstan.¹ The country, which hosted the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) summit in 2010, claims to be the bearer of the principle of the indivisibility of Eurasian security.

Tokayev would have shared this vision with Vladimir Putin during his visit to the Kremlin on February 10, 2022: the war was provoked by the non-compliance with the Minsk agreements, but Kazakhstan calls on the parties to come to an agreement and is ready to mediate. Tokayev has set up working groups to study the consequences of sanctions on Russia on the Eurasian Economic Union in order to advise the executive on how to avoid negative impacts to the Kazakh economy.²

¹ The Astana Times, "President Tokayev participates in extraordinary congress of Amanat party, urges Russia and Ukraine to reach agreement, <https://astanatimes.com/2022/03/president-tokayev-participates-in-extraordinary-congress-of-amanat-party-urges-russiaand-ukraine-to-reach-agreement/>

² Euractiv, "Kazakhstan takes distance from Russia's Ukraine war", https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/kazakhstan-takes-distance-from-russias-ukraine-war/?utm_source=Eurasia+Group+Signal&utm_campaign=a8fb0e693b-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2022_03_18_11_06&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_e605619869-a8fb0e693b-134307961

For some, Kazakhstan's position is unexpected. It is a position in line with the logic of an increasingly multipolar world and is not divided into opposing blocks. The goal is to facilitate a multipolar transition and prevent a return to the spheres of influence. Kazakhstan is also a major player in the post-Soviet region, a member of the OSCE, Russia's main ally in Central Asia who also has good relations with Ukraine, and hosted the Russian-Turkish-Iranian negotiations in 2016 for peace in Syria (the so-called "Astana Process"). Finally, the Central Asian region has no direct interest in the conflict and has a strong tradition of multi-vector policies and pacifism.

These factors allow to understand the actions taken by the Kazakh government. According to a report by US broadcaster NBC, the US National Security Council welcomed Kazakhstan's decision not to send troops to support Russia in Ukraine and not to recognise the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics.³ On the other hand, Nur-Sultan has avoided publicly condemning Moscow's actions, so much to attract Western criticism and the threat of possible sanctions.⁴

Tokayev was also the only regional leader to have made telephone calls to Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky since the beginning of the invasion.⁵ Berik Kurmangali, spokesman of the Kazakh President, said the meeting was held "at the request of Ukraine."⁶ Zelensky stated that he had discussed security in the whole region and had reached agreements on humanitarian issues and promised to stay in touch. Earlier, Tokayev had called Putin and asked him to reach a compromise on the war in Ukraine. In Almaty, the authorities have allowed antiwar demonstrations and those who expose the "Z" of Russian military vehicles engaged in hostilities are fined, but two anti-Russian bloggers have also been arrested. At the extraordinary session of the UN General Assembly on 2 March, where the resolution condemning Russia was approved with 141 votes, Kazakhstan was one of 35 abstentions. Finally, on 14 and 15 March, two flights loaded with humanitarian aid left Kazakhstan for Ukraine,⁷ but landed in Poland.

ANALYSIS

Kazakhstan is similar to Ukraine in terms of concentration of ethnic Russians in its northern regions bordering Russia, mirroring eastern and southern parts of Ukraine. The demography of Kazakhstan has changed since independence in 1991, with the proportion of ethnic Kazakhs rising steadily. In 1989, 37.4 percent of the population were ethnic Russians, which was almost as large as the ethnic Kazakhs at 39.6 percent. However, by 2016, the Russian population in Kazakhstan had declined to about 21 percent. Today, it is estimated that only 18 percent of Kazakhstan's 19 million people are Russians.⁸

Despite the changes in the population composition of Kazakhstan's due to the emigration of ethnic Russians and the influx of expatriate Kazakhs, the situation in northern Kazakhstan is different, with ethnic Kazakhs being a minority at 35.03 percent of the population in this region. On the other hand, the number of ethnic Russians in northern

³ Sicurezza Internazionale, "La guerra ucraina vista dall'Asia Centrale", <https://sicurezzainternazionale.luiss.it/2022/03/06/la-guerraucraina-vista-dallasia-centrale/>

⁴ Asianews, "Guerra in Ucraina: i Kazaki si offrono per mediazione tra Mosca e Kiev", <https://www.asianews.it/notizie-it/Guerra-in-Ucraina:-i-kazaki-si-offrono-per-mediazione-tra-Mosca-e-Kiev-55279.html>

⁵ Asianews, "Il Kazakistan rischia di essere un'altra Ucraina", <https://www.asianews.it/notizie-it/Il-Kazakistan-rischia-di-essere-unaltra-Ucraina-55482.html>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Il Sussidiario, "Russia vs Ucraina: quegli strani fatti in Kazakistan che preparano una svolta", <https://www.ilsussidiario.net/news/russia-vs-ucraina-quegli-strani-fatti-in-kazakistan-che-preparano-una-svolta/2307832/>

⁸ The Economist, "How Kazakhstan became more Kazakh", <https://www.economist.com/asia/2022/01/29/how-kazakhstan-becamemore-kazakh>

Kazakhstan are estimated at 49.53 percent.⁹ The sizeable Russian landmass nearby may be the cause of a minority syndrome in the Kazakh majority of Kazakhstan. Russians in northern Kazakhstan could turn to Russia to protect their interests, which creates a feeling of vulnerability among Kazakhs. On 10 June 1998, the Government of Kazakhstan had transferred the national capital from Almaty, located on the southern periphery, to Astana in central Kazakhstan, perhaps with the intention of reinforcing the government's authority over the entire territory of the country from a more central location.

Periodic statements by influential Russians that Kazakhstan is an artificial construct have not helped. On 29 August 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that the Kazakhs had statehood for only a brief time, and on 10 December 2020, Vyacheslav Nikonov, Chairman of the Education and Science Committee of the Russian Duma, said that a large part of the territory of Kazakhstan was a great gift from Russia and the Soviet Union. Nikonov also said that "northern Kazakhstan was not inhabited at all, and Kazakhs existed, but much further south."¹⁰ On 15 December 2020, the Former Kazakh President Nazarbayev reacted angrily, and the Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) delivered a note of protest to the Russian Embassy.

In his address to the nation on 21 February 2022, President Putin had rejected the notion that Ukraine ever had "real statehood" and claimed that Ukraine had always been a part of Russia's "own history, culture, spiritual space."¹¹ When provoked, Kazakhs have appeared eager to defend their distinct identity. In 1986, the Soviet leadership replaced long-standing General Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan Dinmukhamed Kunaev with the non-Kazakh, Gennady Kolbin (an ethnic Russian). Although the widespread protests were suppressed, the Soviet leadership had to replace Kolbin with the ethnic-Kazakh Nursultan Nazarbayev.

Issues relating to China have also been raised recently. In 2016, protests were directed against the draft bill that would have allowed foreigners to lease Kazakh land for 25 years. These protests were mainly aimed at Chinese nationals, whose presence in the country became increasingly visible. In May 2018, Kazakh President Tokayev signed a law banning the sale and lease of agricultural land to foreigners.¹² With this law, the Kazakh leadership hoped to adequately address public anger against Chinese entrepreneurs acquiring land in the country. Moreover, in April 2020, Kazakh MFA protested to the Chinese Ambassador after a Chinese website wrote that Kazakhstan had been a "vassal of the Qing dynasty."¹³

While Kazakh nationalism manifests itself from time to time in various forms, it is paradoxical that Kazakhstan's leadership in extreme situations might depend on Russia for its survival. Recent evidence of this was in January 2022, when violent demonstrations erupted in Kazakhstan in response to the government's decision to lift the price cap on liquified petroleum gas from 1 January 2022. Meeting Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's request, the Russia-

⁹ The Diplomat, "Is northern Kazakhstan at risk to Russia?", <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/is-northern-kazakhstan-at-risk-to-russia/>

¹⁰ Eurasianet, "Russian nationalists again rile Kazakhstan by questioning its nationhood", <https://eurasianet.org/russian-nationalists-again-rile-kazakhstan-by-questioning-its-nationhood>

¹¹ President of Russia, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation", <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828> ¹² The Diplomat, "Kazakhstan bans sale of agricultural lands to foreigners", <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/kazakhstan-bans-sale-of-agricultural-lands-to-foreigners/>

¹² The Diplomat, "Kazakhstan bans sale of agricultural lands to foreigners", <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/kazakhstan-bans-sale-of-agricultural-lands-to-foreigners/>

¹³ Caravanserai, "Kazakhstan protest with China over article questioning its sovereignty", https://central.asianews.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2020/04/17/feature-02

led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) rapidly deployed troops to support the Kazakh Government and quell the protests,¹⁴ which were believed to cause over 200 deaths.

Apart from Russia, China has a strong presence and stakes in Central Asia and Kazakhstan through its comprehensive capabilities, which certainly makes its behaviour in this crisis interesting. China has both extensive commercial interests in the country and security concerns regarding Uyghurs and other cross-border ethnic linkages.

While China is an influential player in Kazakhstan, it initially held back during the January 2022 crisis.¹⁵ However, after President Tokayev's January 7, 2022 speech blaming foreign-trained terrorists for the violence, China's President Xi Jinping offered his support to defeat the attempt to engineer a revolution in Kazakhstan. In the end, China should have been satisfied with the intervention by Russia and CSTO in support of the Kazakh Government.

Russia and China are not the only major players in the country. The US is Kazakhstan's second biggest investor after the Netherlands, leaving countries like Russia and China behind in terms of direct investment¹⁶. Kazakhstan is a resource-rich country, and in 2022 around 600 US companies are operating in the region with an average investment of \$45 billion. On top of that, from 2005 to 2020 Kazakhstan's cumulative energy investment was \$161 billion, of which \$30 billion came directly from the US.¹⁷

In a way, the ongoing war between Russia–Ukraine is a continuation of the process that began in 2014 with the Maidan protests in Ukraine and led to the overthrow of pro-Russia President Viktor Yanukovich. Kazakhstan had nothing against the referendum of 16 March 2014 in Crimea, which legitimised the Russian annexation as “yet another manifestation of realising a nation's right to self-determination.”¹⁸ However, in response to Ukraine's concerns, Nur-Sultan provided an opposite version explaining that it did not recognize the annexation. Still, the people of Crimea had legitimate security, social and humanitarian interests. It could be argued that Kazakhstan has avoided explicitly criticising Russia, Ukraine, or the West. But in different ways, it has favoured Russia.

This time as well, Kazakhstan's response to the Ukrainian conflict appeared more weighted in favour of Russia. In his address to the 22nd Extraordinary Congress of the ruling Amanat Party on 1 March 2022, President Tokayev called on Russia and Ukraine to find common ground and reach an agreement at the negotiating table.¹⁹ He said that a bad peace is better than a good war, and he went on the quote: “The principle of indivisibility and commonality of security stipulates mutual understanding based on mutual trust. Unfortunately, this has not happened. The Minsk agreements had remained only on paper, which led to the military operations on the territory of Ukraine...”. Kazakhstan offered every possible assistance, including mediation, if necessary.

When President Putin discussed the Ukrainian situation with Tokayev the next day, the latter pushed for a compromise between Russia and Ukraine. The Kazakh authorities also discouraged anti-Russia protests.²⁰ In early March, the Kazakh authorities had allowed anti-war activists to hold a rally in Almaty against the Russian invasion of

¹⁴ EastAsiaForum, “Tokayev wins the battle but the war is not over in Kazakhstan”, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/02/26/tokayevwins-the-battle-but-the-war-is-not-over-in-kazakhstan/>

¹⁵ RadioFreeEurope, “What Kazakhstan's crisis means for China”, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-crisis-china-xitoqaev/31646208.html>

¹⁶ TRT World, “How will Western investments fare in Kazakhstan after the unrest?”, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/how-will-western-investments-fare-in-kazakhstan-after-the-unrest-53627>

¹⁷ Forbes, “The future of western energy investments in Kazakhstan”, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/arielcohen/2022/02/07/the-future-of-western-energy-investments-in-kazakhstan/?sh=37ce31f454b4>

¹⁸ Refworld, “Kazakhstan responds to Ukraine crisis”, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5332b98b4.html>

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ The Moscow Times, “Russia ally Kazakhstan blocks Ukraine peace rally”, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/03/19/russia-ally-kazakhstan-blocks-ukraine-peace-rally-a77004>

Ukraine, attended by some 2,000 demonstrators. However, a similar protest rally on 19 March 2022 was not approved.

Some reports from the West suggested that Kazakhstan had denied the Russian request to let its troops participate in the offensive in Ukraine and indicated that it would not recognise the so-called Republics of Donetsk and Lugansk.²¹ Previously, Kazakhstan didn't recognise the so-called republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgian territories occupied by Russia after the Russia–Georgia war in August 2008.

What came out stronger was Kazakhstan's sense of urgency to shield its economy from western sanctions on Russia. Apart from traditional linkages, Kazakhstan is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Eurasian Customs Union, along with Russia, Armenia, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan. Kazakhstan's MFA tasked its Embassies to urgently engage with key European ports authorities and, as already mentioned, also started to analyse the impact of sanctions on Russian transport and logistic companies.

On 11 March 2022, Kazakhstan engaged in online consultations with the US on the sanctions against Russia. It appeared to be a Kazakh initiative, with almost 80 participants from the Kazakh side, while the American counterpart informed them about the new trade, economic, banking, financial, and energy sanctions.²²

There are reports that Kazakhstan is attempting to divert imports and exports from Russian ports to Latvia in order to evade international sanctions. The Caspian Sea Pipeline Consortium (CPC), stretching over 1,500 km, connects the Tengiz oil field in Kazakhstan with the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk. This pipeline accounts for 2/3 of Kazakhstan's oil exports. The US has excluded the Chevron-led Caspian pipeline concession from its ban on Russian oil and gas imports in order to keep this export route open as long as the crude oil is not of Russian origin.²³

At a virtual meeting with Central Asian Foreign Ministers held on 28 February 2022, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken condemned Russia's attack on Ukraine and reiterated Washington's support for that nation's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity.²⁴ His Central Asian colleagues, however, did not join him in expressing similar sentiments.

CONCLUSION

Kazakhstan's immediate priority is to safeguard its economic and commercial interests by ensuring that the Western sanctions imposed on Russia do not adversely impact its exports. However, alternative transit options such as China and Iran have limitations.

The Russia–Ukraine war has put Kazakhstan's foreign policy to a severe test for which there are no easy solutions. There are similarities between Ukraine and Kazakhstan, but these should not be exaggerated. A critical provocation

²¹ Euractiv, "kazakhstan takes distance from Russia's Ukraine war", <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/kazakhstan-takes-distance-from-russias-ukraine-war/>

²² Kazakh Telegraph Agency, "Kazakhstan and US held consultations on minimizing negative impact of anti-Russian sanctions", <https://kaztag.info/en/news/kazakhstan-ad-us-held-consultations-on-minimizing-negative-impact-of-anti-russian-sanctions>

²³ Reuters, "Kazak CPC oil exports suspended due to storm damage, bad weather", <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/kazakh-cpc-oil-exports-suspended-due-to-storm-damage-ongoing-bad-weather-2022-03-23/>

²⁴ US Department of State, "Secretary Blinken's call with Central Asia Foreign Ministers", <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-call-with-central-asian-foreign-ministers/>

for Russia in its ties with Ukraine was the prospect of NATO at its doorstep. This may not be the case with Kazakhstan, although Russia tends to keep a watchful eye on American activities in Central Asia even without the NATO factor.

During a telephone conversation with President Putin on 2 April 2022, President Tokayev said that “a common understanding was expressed of the exceptional importance of reaching agreements on the neutral, non-aligned, nuclear-free status of Ukraine.”²⁵ Therefore, Kazakhstan seems to agree with Russia on the terms on which the war with Ukraine can be ended. Examining Kazakhstan’s approach to the Russia–Ukraine war, it is possible to discern a distinct tilt in the direction of Russia.

As a result, the Kazakh Ministry of Defence is waging an information war against the many rumours of Kazakh intervention on the ground, which often appears on social networks as alleged photo and video evidence. This purported intervention could have been expected for Tokayev's "debt" to Moscow. In Kazakhstan at the beginning of the year, the forces of the Collective Defence Treaty Organization (CSTO) intervened to quell the alleged attempts to overthrow the state directed by "foreign powers". According to the Kazakh government, the latter rode the wave of protests over the increase in the price of fuel to arm groups of Islamic fundamentalists.²⁶ It is reasonable to think that Nur-Sultan will not detach too much from Moscow, a country with which it has political-military ties, and that Russia does not force too hard against its Central Asian ally, both because of its close relations with the Tokayev government, and to not antagonize China, which has invested heavily in the country under the Belt and Road Initiative.

Recommendations for US / USCENTCOM

- Exploit Kazakhstan’s position in the Ukraine war and strengthen existing relations with the Kazakh Government on the military level.
- Promote a STRATCOM message stressing that the US sanctions imposed on Russia don’t undermine or affect US-Kazakhstan trade relations.
- Promote bilateral and multilateral training exercises with the Kazakh armed forces (at various levels, and mainly aimed at peacekeeping ops).
- Promote military virtual and constructive simulation with the Kazakh counterpart (for HQs and operational units) via federated platforms.

²⁵ President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev had a telephone conversation with President Vladimir Putin of Russia”, <https://www.akorda.kz/en/president-kassym-jomart-tokayev-had-a-telephone-conversation-with-president-vladimir-putin-of-russia-235634>

²⁶ L’anti-diplomatico, “Kazakistan: quali sono le reti terroriste islamiste coinvolte nel tentativo di colpo di stato di gennaio”, https://www.lantidiplomatico.it/dettnews-kazakistan_quali_sono_le_reti_terroriste_islamiste_coinvolte_nel_tentativo_di_colpo_di_stato_di_gennaio/24790_44927/