

# COMMENTARY



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## Kazakhstan's international balancing act moves closer to home

*By Kamila Smagulova*

Over the past three decades, the Kazakh leadership has been consistently working to build a reputation as an international host and peace broker. The power transfer in 2019 from President Nursultan Nazarbayev to President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev did not change that. As part of a broader nation-building project, Kazakhstan has carefully built its international image. Chairing and hosting international fora, as well as offering its services as peace broker between conflicting parties, have both been part of this process. However, developments over the past year could potentially alter this policy. First, the January 2022 unrest has upset Kazakhstan's reputation as a stable and peaceful country. Second, the impact of Russia's war on Ukraine has changed Kazakhstan's internal and external outlook. Whereas Kazakhstan is likely to continue to seek an active international role, the stakes are higher as conflict is closer to home and Kazakhstan's own future is part of the calculation.

Kazakhstan did not give up its role in bringing international actors together in 2022. In October, Astana hosted the sixth Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) summit. The summit was attended by, among others, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin on a rare trip outside Russia. Also in October, Kazakhstan welcomed European Council President Charles Michel, while a month earlier Chinese President Xi Jinping had made his first international visit after the covid-19 pandemic to Astana, en route to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) gathering in Uzbekistan. Whereas in the past Kazakhstan had to work hard to be seen as a venue or broker, nowadays international leaders gather in Astana to meet with each other and also to work with Kazakhstan as an actor in its own right.

Former President Nursultan Nazarbayev stood at the basis of Kazakhstan's efforts to be recognised as an international venue of cooperation and as a peace broker. In the early 1990s, Kazakhstan sought recognition beyond its former Soviet background. The first decade of independence is often described as the 'nuclear diplomacy era', during which Kazakhstan worked closely with Russia and the United States (US) on denuclearisation. Promoting a nuclear-free Central Asia is still a major pillar of Kazakhstan's foreign policy. The 1990s also gave rise to the CICA initiative, which was proposed by Nazarbayev at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 1992. Nazarbayev's first attempts at brokering peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan on Nagorno-Karabakh at the beginning of the decade did not yield results but did set the tone for Kazakhstan's active international posture.

The 2000s can be considered as the 'golden era' of Kazakhstan's economic development as a major oil exporter. During this decade, Kazakhstan regarded its relations with Russia as an anchor, while demarcating the immense border between both countries. At the same time, Kazakhstan actively worked with China (in the SCO framework, for instance) and the European Union (EU) (Kazakhstan's 'Path to Europe' document of 2008), boosting its exports to both actors. Astana also worked closely with Washington to counter terrorism. Kazakhstan's international efforts culminated in its 2010 chairmanship of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (it was the first post-Soviet state to participate in the body) and in the organisation of OSCE's first summit in over a decade.

The 2010s can be characterised as a decade of consolidation of Kazakhstan's international politics in which it started deepening its peace brokering efforts. In 2015, Kazakhstan had offered to hold Normandy-format peace negotiations over the Russia-Ukraine conflict in Astana, yet the meeting eventually took place in Minsk in February 2015. At the same time, this period finished with the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union, which was initiated by Nazarbayev and which might have indirectly influenced its peace-making priorities in the region in general and in relation to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in particular. A few years later, Kazakhstan organised Syria Peace Talks in Astana. In both cases, Kazakhstan played to its strengths as a country which is both close to Russia and also acceptable to Western countries and China. In 2017, Kazakhstan was elected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council; an opportunity that was less visible to the public than the grand nation-branding EXPO that was held in Kazakhstan that same year, but certainly impactful on the international diplomatic stage.

After the 2019 power transfer following the resignation of Nursultan Nazarbayev and the inauguration of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the line of international nation-branding was continued, not least because the current president was a high-ranking career diplomat. In the official narrative, his international career in the UN, in particular, has been highlighted as the basis to continue with the former president's path. After a set of (locally and internationally criticised) reforms in the aftermath of the January 2022 events, this narrative is being supported by the president's idea of building a Jana Kazakhstan (New Kazakhstan). As an example of this, on 27 October 2022, the first regional Central Asia-European Union high-level meeting with the participation of leaders from the five Central Asian states and European Council President Charles Michel was held in Astana, during which Michel highlighted President Tokayev's 'ambitious reforms'. Thus, despite current challenges to internal stability, Tokayev's international image remains positive.

Two events could undermine Kazakhstan's reputation in foreign policy. First, having had to call Russian CSTO troops to quell the internal protests and violence of January 2022 has not done much good to the country's reputation. However, whereas the events are still surrounded by many questions, alike other developments in Europe and Central Asia, they seem to have been overshadowed by the war in Ukraine. The November 2022 snap elections for the presidency seem to have cemented Tokayev's position, although instability cannot be ruled out in the near future.

Second, the war in Ukraine is an enormous challenge for Kazakhstan, both domestically and internationally. In the former case, the sudden and large influx of Russian immigrants avoiding mobilisation has impacted the Kazakh economy and society, with increasing rises in the price of rent, growing inflation, and social polarisation. In the latter case, Kazakhstan is walking a thin line between firmly disagreeing with Russia's war in Ukraine and being open to working with Russia. In September 2022, Tokayev was clear on non-recognition of the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk, while during the vote on the UN General Assembly resolution on Russia's illegal annexation, Kazakhstan abstained (just as in 2014 after Russia's annexation of Crimea). Tokayev's visit to Moscow at the end of November 2022, after which he went straight to Paris, embodies this balancing approach between Russia and Western partners.

These events result in threats and opportunities for Kazakhstan. Nation-building and foreign policy, including peace brokering, have become hard necessities for Kazakhstan. Both a powerful Russia – that has questioned Kazakhstan’s statehood in the past – and a Russia in turmoil would pose a severe threat to Kazakhstan. In this respect, Central Asian countries have shared concerns. For example, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which seldom see eye-to-eye on regional cooperation, are now approaching each other as a result of uncertainty over Russia’s future.

But perhaps opportunities could override concerns for Kazakhstan, as China, the EU, the US, and Turkey are all keen to (re-)explore energy and transport links that go around Russia through Kazakhstan. There seem to be new opportunities on the horizon with China’s Belt and Road project, while the EU has put its cards on connectivity projects that are largely aimed at Kazakhstan. Besides economic opportunities, one could imagine that Kazakhstan, along with Georgia, for instance, become places where Russians and Europeans can meet either in a formal capacity or in a more informal civil society setting.

Kazakhstan’s efforts to position itself as an international host and peace broker have always been part of its nation-building project. Today, these efforts are no longer part of a stand-alone project that Kazakhstan could pursue far from international tensions and conflict while building a solid international reputation. Nowadays, these efforts are a necessity to a foreign policy that is aimed at both maintaining internal stability and strengthening the country’s international position.

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