



FOURTH VECTOR: MAKING SENSE OF KAZAKHSTAN'S ACTIVISM IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan has developed a track record of being the most proactive and innovative former Soviet republic in the sphere of international cooperation. Kazakhstan's multilateral relations have always expressed a clear logic: to establish itself as a reliable and constructive international actor. The core of this strategy has been to create several foreign policy pillars – Russia, China, the U.S., the EU, Turkey – without prioritizing one too heavily over the other. However, in recent years the Russian pillar has expanded heavily, thus compromising the delicate balance of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy.

In the past two years, Kazakhstan has joined the World Trade Organization, obtained a seat at the Asia-Europe Meeting, signed an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union, announced it would host the EXPO-2017 in Astana, and launched a bid for a rotating seat at the United Nations Security Council. This extraordinary high frequency of international engagements is remarkable, but it represents a difference in degree and not nature in Kazakhstan's diplomatic history. Indeed, since the fall of the Soviet Union Kazakhstan has developed a record of being the most proactive and innovative former Soviet republic in the sphere of international cooperation.

Kazakhstan's Proactive Foreign Policy

Kazakhstan's international engagement can be understood as forming three categories. A first category are unilateral Kazakh initiatives. A second relates to Kazakhstan's leading role in promoting regional, Eurasian integration. A third is Kazakhstan's efforts to integrate with Western-led international organizations.

Kazakhstan's unilateral initiatives began, logically, in the field of nuclear non-proliferation. Left with a considerable nuclear arsenal in 1991, its decision to forgo the status of nuclear power helped Kazakhstan obtain a platform on the international scene. Since then, Kazakhstan's efforts to play a prominent role in the field of peaceful nuclear

technology led to the decision in 2015 to build and host the world's first international low-enriched (LEU) bank in Kazakhstan under the auspices of the IAEA. Also in the early days of independence, Kazakhstan launched the idea of a Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) – a format that has grown to include 26 member countries. Kazakhstan has also been a driving force in civilizational dialogue through convening a Congress of World Religions, and in boosting the cooperation among Turkic-language countries.

In the former Soviet space, Astana has been a leading promoter of Eurasian integration. The perhaps most well-known example is the fact that the concept of a Eurasian Economic Union is actually originally an idea emanating from Kazakhstan rather than Russia. It dates back to the conviction of Kazakhstan's top leadership, during the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, that the positive aspects of Eurasian integration needed to be preserved. But Kazakhstan's efforts originally focused equally, if not more, on Central Asian cooperation and integration. Astana was the driving force behind the Central Asian Cooperation Forum in 1998, and subsequently the Central Asian Cooperation Organization created in 2002. However, due in part to lukewarm support in the region and in much greater degree to Russian ambitions to dominate all forms of Eurasian integration, CACO was subsumed under the Russia-led Euro-Asian Economic Community in 2005. While Astana has continued to support Central Asian inte-



gration, it also participated in the efforts to build a Eurasian Customs Union in 2010, later morphed into the Eurasian Economic Union.

Kazakhstan's approach to Eurasian integration has underlined the economic nature of these institutions, and rejected any ambition to turn them into a political union. Kazakhstan's approach seems to rest on the twin assumptions that economics and politics can be strictly divided, and that a union in which one member has overwhelming economic and political power can really be an association of equals. Developments during the past several years have given reason to doubt the feasibility of these assumptions. Indeed, Kazakhstan's leadership has emphasized that Kazakhstan has the right to leave any organization that turns into a political union potentially infringing upon its national sovereignty. While firmly embedded in Russian-led structures, including the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Kazakhstan has also invested in the emergence of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, China's primary vehicle for influence in the region.

On the international arena, Kazakhstan has accorded considerable energy to its interactions with the OSCE, EU and NATO. Most notably, and in spite of controversy surrounding its domestic situation, Kazakhstan was elected to chair the OSCE in 2010, a task in which it succeeded in hosting a summit of the organization for the first time in 11 years. The country's relations with NATO are restrained by its membership in the CSTO; yet Kazakhstan is the only country in Central Asia to have advanced its cooperation with NATO to the level of developing an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) under the PfP, and has sought to make its peacekeeping brigade, Kazbrig, fully consistent with NATO by reaching NATO Evaluation Level 2. With the EU, Kazakhstan in 2015 became the first Central Asian country to conclude an Enhanced Cooperation Agreement with the EU – an arrangement looser than the Association Agreements the EU has offered Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, but more ambitious than the existing agreement between the EU and Russia.

This is the background against which Kazakhstan launched its bid for a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council for 2017. The campaign is anchored in Kazakhstan's foreign policy concept 2014-2020, where active participation in international organizations is presented as an important tool to protect Kazakhstan's national interests and secure maximum visibility and leverage for its foreign

policy on the regional as well as global arena. This objective appears to be perceived as a final confirmation of Kazakhstan's steadfast commitment to playing a constructive role in international affairs.

Asserting Statehood: Balance among the Pillars

The distinguishing characteristic of Kazakhstan's external policy in the past decade has been a balanced model with partnerships reaching out as broadly as possible – a strategy that has enabled the Kazakh leadership to build strong economic and political relations with multiple partners at a relatively low cost, and without creating adversaries in international politics.

Kazakhstan's foreign policy in general and its multilateral relations in particular has since early on expressed a clear logic: to establish itself as a reliable and constructive international actor. Astana has been keen to build a role as a reputable international player that can be a pragmatic partner with all quarters of the globe. The core of that strategy has been to create several foreign policy pillars – Russia, China, the U.S., the EU, Turkey – that are rather harmonious in size and shape. The key balancing act has been to keep the house in order by not allowing any pillar to totally outweigh the others. However, the major challenge in recent years is that the Russian pillar has expanded so heavily that the house is less balanced than before. It is in this light that the West should understand the recent surge in international activities coming from Astana – from the admission to the WTO and ASEM to campaigns aimed at securing a seat at the UNSC and joining the OECD as well as trying to increase its visibility as a state by organizing global ventures, such as the upcoming Expo 2017. From this perspective, it is in the West's interests to support Kazakhstan's efforts to maintain the balance by further committing to engage with the country. These efforts should, not least, be welcomed in the light of an increasingly polarized and unfavorable geopolitical context.

It must be pointed out that Kazakhstan's ability to maintain a balanced foreign policy and pursuing multiple partnerships are both enabled and constrained by the presence of certain structural conditions. As Alexander Cooley has persuasively shown, multivectorism in Kazakhstan as well as the other Central Asian states was enabled by the emergence of a specific set of external factors connected to three major powers – China, Russia and the U.S. – present



in the region during 2001-2011. The first was the U.S.'s decisive emergence in Central Asia after 9/11 and the security partnership it formed with the regional states in the War on Terror. The second factor was China's dramatic economic expansion into the region coupled with Russia's retrenchment. The third and final was what scholar Alexander Cooley labels Russia's weak "unite and influence strategy." The resulting multivectorism flourished in the region, and lasted for ten years, during this period enabling not only Kazakhstan, but also the small states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, to take advantage of external powers for enhancing their own interests.

Following the drawdown of U.S. forces from Afghanistan and the region, Russia's annexation of Crimea and its military aggression in the eastern regions of Ukraine as well as the increasing institutionalization of Russia's influence in the region through the EEU, the geopolitical dynamics in the region have altered to the extent that maintaining external balances is already becoming a much greater challenge for Central Asia's leaders. While China has indicated an intention to match Russia's effort to a greater engagement with the region, the West has decisively failed to do so.

Is a Multi-Vector Foreign Policy Still an Option?

For Kazakhstan's future external engagements and, indirectly, for its assertion of statehood, the key question is whether the golden era of multivectorism since the turn of the Millennium will continue. A pessimist may fear that the period of multivectorism will come to be seen as representing an interlude only, with Kazakhstan returning to a one-sided reliance on partnership with Russia, which existed in the 1990s and may again be consolidating. An optimist may counter that the present Russian-centric tendencies may themselves be an interlude in Kazakhstan's 25-year long process of emergence on the international scene – an interlude that will revert to the mean, that is, to the continued strengthening of Kazakhstan's sovereignty and statehood.

What should be clear from this inquiry is that Kazakhstan has not abandoned its vision of a multi-vector foreign policy. In fact, it is seeking alternative external partners and avenues more persistently than ever. Indeed, the country formally pioneered the notion of a "multi-vector" foreign policy from the late 1990s onward – focusing on its relations with Russia, China, and subsequently the United States. The record of its involvement in multilateral organi-

zations is of such a magnitude that it could truly be termed the "fourth vector" of Kazakhstan's foreign policy – one that not only puts Kazakhstan on the map, but anchors its sovereignty in a multitude of international settings.

Yet Kazakhstan cannot do this on its own: its success in maintaining balance – and in the process keeping the heart of Eurasia open – will depend on the existence of partners willing to engage with the region, and reciprocate to Kazakhstan's overtures. The United States played a major role in this regard in the 2001-11 period. Since then, however, the retrenchment of Western presence in Central Asia, coupled with greater Russian assertiveness, have changed the balance of power. There are hopeful signs that both the United States and Europe are taking steps to re-engage Kazakhstan and its neighbors, but so far, these steps have yet to ensure that the conditions will continue to exist for a successful multivector policy to succeed in the region.

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