

# Kazakhstan's Role in International Mediation under First President Nursultan Nazarbayev

Svante E. Cornell  
S. Frederick Starr

SILK ROAD PAPER  
November 2020



*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute*  
*Silk Road Studies Program*



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American Foreign Policy Council, 509 C St NE, Washington D.C.  
Institute for Security and Development Policy, V. Finnbodavägen 2, Stockholm-Nacka, Sweden  
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**“Kazakhstan’s Role in International Mediation under First President Nursultan Nazarbayev”** is a *Silk Road Paper* published by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, Joint Center. The Silk Road Papers Series is the Occasional Paper series of the Joint Center, which addresses topical and timely subjects. The Joint Center is a transatlantic independent and non-profit research and policy center. It has offices in Washington and Stockholm and is affiliated with the American Foreign Policy Council and the Institute for Security and Development Policy. It is the first institution of its kind in Europe and North America, and is firmly established as a leading research and policy center, serving a large and diverse community of analysts, scholars, policy-watchers, business leaders, and journalists. The Joint Center is at the forefront of research on issues of conflict, security, and development in the region. Through its applied research, publications, research cooperation, public lectures, and seminars, it functions as a focal point for academic, policy, and public discussion regarding the region.

Research for this publication was made possible through the core funding of the Joint Center’s institutional sponsors, as well as project support from the Embassy of Kazakhstan in Sweden. The opinions and conclusions expressed in this study are those of the authors only, and do not necessarily reflect those of the Joint Center or its sponsors.

© **Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2020**

ISBN: 978-91-88551-19-1

Printed in Lithuania

Distributed in North America by:

Central Asia-Caucasus Institute

American Foreign Policy Council

509 C St NE, Washington DC 20002

E-mail: [info@silkroadstudies.org](mailto:info@silkroadstudies.org)

Distributed in Europe by:

The Silk Road Studies Program

Institute for Security and Development Policy

Västra Finnbodavägen 2, SE-13130 Stockholm-Nacka

E-mail: [info@silkroadstudies.org](mailto:info@silkroadstudies.org)

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to the European offices of the Joint Center (preferably by e-mail.)

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## Preface

Over the past decade, the geopolitics of Central Asia and the Caucasus have become increasingly complex. Indeed, the U.S. National Security Strategy identifies “strategic competition” among Eurasian great powers as a defining challenge to the United States. While that is not always acknowledged, Central Asia and the Caucasus lie at the heart of this intensifying great power competition, and have thus attracted greater attention from great powers in recent years. Undoubtedly, this is part of the reason why both the European Union and the United States have developed new strategies toward Central Asia in the past two years.

Outside observers have long tended to view the region’s geopolitics as a “Great Game” among these large powers, and have thus largely ignored the agency of these states. In fact, they frequently continue to be viewed as pawns in a game over which they have little or no control.

It is true, of course, that most regional states are small compared to the behemoths that surround them. Some of them continue to be marred by weak institutions and dependency on outside powers. But over the past three decades, most have built the foundation of statehood, and developed institutions and strategies to manage the complicated environment that surrounds them. In the past decade, importantly, several regional states have emerged as mid-size powers that play important roles in their own right, as active participants in regional process rather than passive bystanders.

Currently, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan all play such roles. Azerbaijan facilitates the emerging transport corridor connecting the Black

and Caspian seas, and Kazakhstan has taken an active role in multilateral institutions by launching CICA and chairing the OSCE. Both have served as non-permanent members of the UN Security Council. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan has actively sought to help resolve the conflict in Afghanistan, and Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have built a partnership designed to develop institutions of regional cooperation in Central Asia.

This study focuses on a most prominent example of agency on the part of regional states: the growing role of Kazakhstan in mediating international disputes. This role is known mainly through the Astana Talks on the Syrian civil war; but as this study illustrates, Kazakhstan's role goes far beyond this. Under the leadership of its First President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan has been involved in alleviating the Kyrgyzstan crisis of 2010, the controversy over the Iranian nuclear program in 2013, the Ukraine conflict in 2014, and the Russian-Turkish dispute in 2016. This facet of Kazakhstani foreign policy has yet to be studied in detail, something this study seeks to remedy.

The authors are grateful for the important assistance provided during their internships at the American Foreign Policy Council by Nicholas Labecki and Diana Glebova, who contributed with research into Kazakhstan's diverse initiatives in the past decade.



## Executive Summary

In the past decade, Kazakhstan has emerged as an important player in the world of mediation of international disputes. Its role in convening the Astana talks on Syria are the most well-known example, but Kazakhstan's activity goes far beyond this. In fact, involvement in international mediation has emerged as yet another facet of Kazakhstan's foreign policy, alongside its high profile in multilateral organizations.

In fact, Kazakhstani mediation builds on two aspects of Kazakhstan's foreign policy: the country's multi-vector foreign policy and its activism in international institutions. Landlocked, surrounded by large powers and closely tied to Russia by economics and demographics, Kazakhstan's efforts to assert its independence have always been a balancing act. Kazakhstan's First President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, established the country on the international scene in the 1990s primarily by his historic decision to renounce Kazakhstan's nuclear weapons, and his careful efforts to build independent statehood in the political realm while simultaneously working to restore economic integration among former Soviet states. Kazakhstan's model has been to maintain close relations with Russia, but simultaneously to strive to strengthen its ties with other partners – first China, then the United States, subsequently Europe and Asian powers – to obtain a positive balance in its foreign relations. This “multi-vector” foreign policy has since become a model that has been adopted by the Central Asian region as a whole.

An active role in multilateral diplomacy was key to Kazakhstan's foreign policy from the beginning: immediately upon independence, Nazarbayev

initiated the idea of a Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building in Asia, which materialized in the decade that followed. Kazakhstan also took on an active role in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, becoming the first post-Soviet state to chair the organization in 2010. Not stopping there, Kazakhstan successfully campaigned for a non-permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council, and served on the Council from 2017 to 2019.

Kazakhstan's first initiative in the field of international mediation took place already in late 1991, when President Nazarbayev partnered with Boris Yeltsin to seek to mediate the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. But it is in the past decade that these efforts have been rekindled, against the background of a gradual intensification of geopolitical competition in Eurasia writ large. Kazakhstan's first effort took place during its OSCE Presidency, when it intervened to attenuate the crisis in neighboring Kyrgyzstan. By assisting in removing ousted President Kurmanbek Bakiyev from the country, Kazakhstan contributed to easing tensions in the country.

Kazakhstan next focused on nuclear diplomacy, an issue with which the country had considerable familiarity. After offering to host an international Low Enriched Uranium Bank, President Nazarbayev succeeded in hosting two successive summits in Almaty on the Iranian nuclear program in 2013. These efforts aimed at seeking a negotiated solution that would halt the escalation of tensions that risked a greater military conflagration. While talks in Almaty did not resolve the matter, they directly paved a way for the Geneva talks that eventually led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on the Iranian nuclear program.

Over the following several years, Kazakhstan focused on alleviating tensions among its close partners – Russia, Turkey and the West. In 2014, Nazarbayev sought to bridge the divide between Russia and the West on Ukraine. Kazakhstan played an active role in facilitating dialogue among

Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany that manifested in the Normandy Format. Two years later, Kazakhstan took a hands-on approach in resolving – at least for a time – the dispute between Russia and Turkey that resulted from the Turkish downing of a Russian jet over the Turkish-Syrian border in 2015. The next year, building on this initiative, Turkey and Russia agreed to President Nazarbayev’s offer to host talks on the Syrian conflict. Several rounds of “Astana Talks” have taken place since, involving the Syrian government, opposition groups, and the key external powers in the conflict – Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

What, then, has been the function and rationale of Kazakhstani mediation efforts?

Kazakhstan’s mediation has not been focused on faraway lands: it has been focused very much on those areas that affect the geopolitical stability of Eurasia, which in turn is the determinant for Kazakhstan’s own stability. Thus, it has concentrated on crises right on Kazakhstan’s doorstep, like in Nagorno-Karabakh and Kyrgyzstan, as well as on disputes that involve the regional and great powers of Eurasia. Both types of crises involved confrontations that threatened to destabilize the geopolitics of Eurasia, and thus posed a threat to Kazakhstan’s own security. Kazakhstan’s economic development and strategic stability is directly correlated to the relative harmony of the broader Eurasian geopolitical environment, and it has been in its interest to work to mitigate such threats to stability.

Kazakhstan’s efforts strengthen its sovereignty in at least two ways. First, it adds another layer of goodwill and recognition to Kazakhstan’s international profile. Secondly and more importantly, it provides regional powers with a strong rationale to accept Kazakhstan’s neutrality in their mutual disputes. Kazakhstan has been able to demonstrate that it is more useful for everyone as a neutral power that does not take sides – in other words, more useful as a mediator than as a supporter. For example, while

Russia would have liked Kazakhstan's endorsement of its policy in Ukraine, Kazakhstan showed that it could, uniquely, serve as a go-between that allowed Russia a way to manage its relations with Western powers, something that would be impossible in the absence of Kazakhstan's sovereignty and international credibility.

This strategy has pitfalls. Its success requires that the level of conflict between Eurasian regional powers remains manageable; and that these powers are, at all, interested in maintaining a dialogue. If regional powers are in mortal competition against each other, Kazakhstan's efforts would be undermined.

Against this background, the impact of Kazakhstan's efforts become clearer. Kazakh leaders were realistic about the limited prospects of success in resolving the thorny issues they addressed. Instead, they were focused primarily on managing the fallout of these conflicts on a geopolitical level, seeking to prevent their escalation in a way that would jeopardize the broader stability of the Eurasian continent.

Kazakhstan's efforts in international mediation have been closely tied to the personality of its First President, Nursultan Nazarbayev. Will Kazakhstan continue to play a role in mediating the great power politics of Eurasia in the longer term? There is reason to believe it can, for two key reasons. First, Kazakhstan's meritocratic approach to personnel policy in foreign affairs has enabled the country to develop a considerable pool of officials with experience of high-level international politics, beginning with its current president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who has among other served as Head of UN offices in Geneva. Second, demand for this type of efforts is not likely to abate, as strategic competition in Eurasia continues to intensify and efforts to mitigate the fallout of great power competition in Eurasia appear to be more necessary for every passing year.

## **Introduction**

In the past decade, the world of international mediation has seen the rise of a new actor. In what had long been the exclusive purview primarily of smaller European states like Sweden, Finland or Switzerland, new forces now play increasingly visible roles in international efforts to manage world conflicts. This study focuses on Kazakhstan's emergence as a mediator and peacemaker during the three decades of Nursultan Nazarbayev's presidency.

Kazakhstan's active diplomacy has already been the subject of considerable analysis. It has focused on the country's preoccupation with a future devoid of nuclear weapons, its active role in international organizations, and more recently, on its involvement in the negotiations over the Syrian civil war. But a listing of Kazakhstani international initiatives reveals a much broader and richer picture. Kazakhstan's efforts at international mediation began even before the country gained independence, as Nazarbayev – then the republic's Soviet-era leader – sought to quell the emerging conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It continued in the 1990s, though Kazakhstan's initiative to create the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). But in the past decade, Kazakhstani diplomacy embarked on a much more active pace of initiatives. The most well-known efforts were Kazakhstan's hosting of talks to bring about a peaceful resolution to the Iranian nuclear question, and subsequently the "Astana Talks" on the Syrian civil war. But Kazakhstan also played roles in less-publicized initiatives. Among other initiatives, Kazakhstan actively engaged in seeking a resolution to the civil unrest in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, in trying to calm the Russian-Ukrainian crisis in 2014, and in mediating

between Russia and Turkey in 2015. More recently, Kazakhstan has proposed its good offices for addressing the crisis on the Korean Peninsula, and suggested a greater initiative of dialogue among great powers.

This study seeks to investigate the roots of Kazakhstan's distinctive vocation for peacemaking, and to identify its implications. It begins with a short overview of Kazakhstan's emergence as an independent state, which fundamentally shaped its approach to world politics. It then moves to an outline of the country's activity in international organizations, and then delves into the details of each Kazakhstani mediation initiative. On this basis the study will identify the rationale underlying Kazakhstan's action, and will offer hypotheses on Kazakhstan future role on the global scene.

# Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy

When Kazakhstan gained membership in the family of independent nations in late 1991, the key word was uncertainty. Even though there had been large and vocal demonstrations in Almaty at the start of Gorbachev's presidency, Kazakhstan had not fought for independence: quite the contrary, as leader of the Kazakhstan Soviet Republic, Nazarbayev had campaigned hard for the Soviet Union to be reformed rather than dissolved. His stature had grown to the extent that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev considered him for the post of Vice President of a reformed union at the time of the failed August 1991 putsch against Gorbachev, which ultimately sealed the fate of the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup>

Nazarbayev's reasons for seeking a reformed union were clear. Kazakhstan had been one of the republics most severely affected by the Soviet experience. Close to 40 percent of the ethnic Kazakh population perished in politically induced famines in the 1920s and 1930s – a larger percentage than the much-better known Ukrainian *holodomor*.<sup>2</sup> As a result of this tragedy and of Soviet support for Slavic immigration to Kazakhstan, ethnic Kazakhs formed only 40 percent of the population of Kazakhstan, followed narrowly by ethnic Russians, most of whom had been sent into the territory of Kazakhstan *en masse* during Khrushchev's virgin lands campaign.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Martha B. Olcott, "Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise", Washington: *Brookings Institution*, 2010, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Only very recently have full studies of this episode been published. Sarah Cameron, "The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan", Ithaca: *Cornell University Press*, 2020; Robert Kindler, "Stalin's Nomads: Power and Famine in Kazakhstan", *University of Pittsburgh Press*, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Richard M. Mills, "The Formation of the Virgin Lands Policy," *Slavic Review*, vol. 29 no. 1, 1970, pp. 58-69.

effect on Kazakh society of these upheavals was profound. In 1986, the Soviet leadership's appointment of an ethnic Russian as the leader of Soviet Kazakhstan sparked several days of violent riots in Almaty, the republic's Soviet-era capital, an episode known as *Jeltoqsan*. At independence, thus, Kazakhstan had a sensitive demographic situation, a largely unmarked five thousand-mile border with Russia, and a deep level of integration into the Soviet economy. Meanwhile, ethnic conflict was brewing in the South Caucasus, while violence motivated by religious ideologies engulfed Afghanistan and soon spread to Tajikistan. Simply put, the challenges of building an independent state were steep indeed, and Nazarbayev considered it vital to maintain the economic linkages of the Soviet Union, while gradually building political sovereignty.

Even as these negative factors were at work, other developments more positive for Kazakhstan were quietly occurring. Largely unknown to Soviet leaders were the findings of Western demographers, among whom the American Murray Feshbach was most prominent. Thus, from the late 1960s down to the collapse of the USSR, high fertility rates among ethnic Kazakhs and the beginning of reverse migration by Slavs meant that the ethnic balance within the republic was beginning to tip in the favor of the indigenous population.<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding these positive developments for the long term, Kazakhstan faced an acute immediate challenge as a result of the Soviet Union's rapid dissolution. The republic had been what scholars termed "at the heart of the Soviet nuclear weapons program," with what would have

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<sup>4</sup> Murray Feshbach, "Prospects for Outmigration from Central Asia and Kazakhstan in the Next Decade" in *Soviet Economy in a Time of Change*, Washington: Joint Economic Committee, Congress of the United States, October 1979, pp. 656-709; Barbara A. Anderson and Brian D. Silver, "Demographic Sources of the Changing Ethnic Composition of the Soviet Union," *Population and Development Review*, vol. 15 no. 4, 1989, pp. 609-656.



made Kazakhstan the fourth-largest nuclear weapons state in the world.<sup>5</sup> Nazarbayev leveraged this situation by using it to establish relationships with world leaders. In renouncing Kazakhstan's nuclear arsenal, he also ensured that the country gained considerable respectability upon which the new nation's foreign policy could build. During the 1990s, as a result, Kazakhstan developed a foreign policy seeking balance in its relations with foreign powers. Codified by Mr. Nazarbayev's Foreign Minister, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, this "multi-vectored" approach to foreign policy rested on several assumptions: it continued to support the economic integration of post-Soviet states, while also building Kazakhstan's relationships with outside powers, primarily China and the United States; finally, it called for an active effort through international organizations to position Kazakhstan as a power welcoming good relations with all the major powers.<sup>6</sup>

### **Securing Internal Cohesion**

The efforts to sustain Kazakhstan's internal cohesion may, at first sight, appear unrelated to the country's efforts to project itself as a generator of international mediation. However, an old axiom holds that all politics are local, and that foreign policy is an extension of domestic politics. This truth helps explain Kazakhstan's approach to international politics. A chief domestic challenge was to manage the country's demographic balance. While Kazakhs had only formed a minority of the population, Soviet-style affirmative action known as *korenizatsiya* ensured that any republic's bureaucracy was largely in the control of that republic's titular nation, thus

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen F. Burgess and Togzhan Kassenova, "The Rollback States: South Africa and Kazakhstan," in Tanya Ogilvie-White and David Santoro, *Slaying the Nuclear Dragon: Disarmament Dynamics in the Twenty-first Century*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012, pp. 85-117.

<sup>6</sup> Kassymzhomart Tokayev, *Pod Styagom Nezavisimosti: Ocherki o Vneshnei Politike Kazakhstana* [Under the Banner of Independence: Essays on the Foreign Policy of Kazakhstan,] Almaty: Bilim, 1997.

meaning Kazakhstan's state institutions were dominated by Kazakhs.<sup>7</sup> This, of course, was an advantage in the efforts to build a modern and independent Kazakhstani state. But simultaneously, the presence of a large and geographically concentrated population of Russians and other Slavs in the country's north and east presented a fundamental challenge. How to assure that the two groups would interact productively in an independent Kazakhstan?

Maintaining inter-ethnic harmony became the highest priority for Kazakhstan's leadership, and it did much to shape the form of government that developed in the country. The centralization of power that occurred in the 1990s provided a tool for ensuring that the government maintained instruments to counter centrifugal forces arising from both Kazakhs and Slavs. It generated a narrative of national unity built on a civic and inclusive sense of the nation. The leadership knew that Kazakhstan could not survive in an uncontrolled political environment of the type that led to internal conflict in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Tajikistan, and which contributed to a decade of political turmoil in Russia itself. Indeed, in Kazakhstan, the strengthening of rival national groups was seen as a threat to the very survival of the country.

President Nazarbayev needed to walk a delicate balance.<sup>8</sup> On one hand, he had to maintain the loyalty of the ethnic Russian population, which he did by adopting a civic conception of the nation, appealing to inter-ethnic harmony, and embracing a prominent role for the Russian language in Kazakhstani society. He also did so by prioritizing cordial relations with Russia and support for economic integration with the northern neighbor. At

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<sup>7</sup> Bernard V. Oliver, "Korenizatsiia," *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 9 no. 3, 1990; Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> See eg. Pål Kolstø, "Anticipating Demographic Superiority: Kazakh Thinking on Integration and Nation Building," *Europe-Asia Studies* vol. 50 no. 1, 1998, 51-69.

the same time, he needed to ensure the buy-in of the many supporters of moderate Kazakh nationalism, something he achieved by maintaining control over the state by ethnic Kazakhs, and by gradually building a nation-state that, while appealing to inclusive civic nationalism, built a homeland for the Kazakh people. This included strengthening the position of the Kazakh language, and most dramatically shifting the country's capital from Almaty in the southwest to the town of Aqmola, previously known as Tselinograd, in the north. The new capital, inaugurated in 1997, served as a magnet for ethnic Kazakhs to move toward the north of the country, thus compensating for the ethnic Russian dominance of the northern regions.

This careful balancing was a resounding success. It is easy now to forget the dire predictions of both political scientists and regional experts thirty years ago concerning Kazakhstan's ability to manage inter-ethnic harmony.<sup>9</sup> But Nazarbayev managed to do that while presiding over a gradual demographic shift that – thanks to higher native birth rates and emigration of Russians and other Slavs – led to Kazakhs presently constituting almost two-thirds of the population, and Russians less than a quarter.<sup>10</sup> Kazakhstan has been similarly successful in managing the competing pressures of urbanization, globalization, and a rise in religious identification among its population.<sup>11</sup>

This experience shaped Kazakhstan's foreign policy, for domestic stability and cohesion rely upon stability in the regional and international realm.

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<sup>9</sup> Donald Horowitz, "How to Begin Thinking Comparatively about Soviet Ethnic Problems", in Alexander J. Motyl, (ed.), *Thinking Theoretically about Soviet Nationalities*, New York, NY: *Columbia University Press*, 1992, pp. 16-17; Martha B. Olcott, "Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: The Demographics of Ethnic Politics," *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 42 no. 2, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Zharmukhamed Zardykhan, "Ethnic Kazakh Repatriation and Kazakh Nation-Building: The Awaited Savior or the Prodigal Son?" *Region*, vol. 5 no. 1, 2016, pp. 17-34; Paul Goble, "New Wave of Kazakh Nationalism Changing Astana's Domestic and Foreign Policies," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 16 no. 32, March 7, 2019; Aimar Ventsel, "Why Kazakhstan Will Never Become a Russian Colony," *ICDS*, June 8, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Alima Bissenova, "Social Change Unsettles Kazakhstan," *Current History*, October 2019.

More than most countries, Kazakhstan's domestic stability is affected by global politics – particularly relations between Russia and the West, but also between Islam and states which define themselves as secular. Ethnic conflicts in the post-Soviet space pose a constant threat to Kazakhstan's cohesion, because they could potentially spill over onto Kazakh society. Conflicts between Russia and the West – or Russia and Turkey – also put Kazakhstan in a precarious position for its strategy is best promoted by positive relations among these powers. The rise of Islamist movements attracted very limited but active segments of Kazakhstan's population. Several hundred Kazakhs left to fight in Syria, while a larger number were prevented from embarking on that journey.

To address these challenges, President Nazarbayev sought to translate Kazakhstan's experience in forging domestic cohesion to a series of conflicts globally, including in states with few traits in common with Kazakhstan.

President Nazarbayev often spoke about how Kazakhstan was able to defuse ethnic tensions through mediation. He put forward mediations carried out within Kazakhstan as an example for the world, and advanced it as evidence of Kazakhstan potential role in mediation internationally. As he himself pointed out in 2019, Kazakhstan, through its steady development, had refuted a host of dire predictions.

This bears emphasis. Thirty years ago, many grave international experts said that Central Asia and Kazakhstan could become the "Eurasian Balkans," replete with unrest and conflict. Nazarbayev noted how such observers, basing their case on the diversity of Kazakhstan's population, claimed that the states of the region would succumb to internal conflicts. Kazakhstan's actual record belies these dire forecasts.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "Назарбаев: Я принял решение после долгих раздумий и хочу, чтобы у вас не было сомнений", *Forbes*, April 29, 2019.

Nazarbayev initiated several projects to develop domestic mediation. The Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan figures large among these initiatives. Created in 1995, is the Assembly an advisory board appointed by the President to represent the various ethnic groups in Kazakhstan. Since 2015, the development of the institution of mediation has become the main focus of the Assembly's work.<sup>13</sup> Another notable project is the School of Mediation and People's Diplomacy, opened in 2016. This institution is dedicated to peer-to-peer conversations, and teaching young people about mediation through simulations, expert speakers, and summer camps. The training is focused on the next generation of Kazakhstanis.<sup>14</sup> Further, in 2019, a mediation center was opened at the Turan-Astana University within the framework of a memorandum of cooperation concluded between the university and the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan. Its rector, Guljamal Japarova, observed that "Nursultan Nazarbayev has repeatedly stressed that the development of a network of mediators has strengthened the legal culture and legal consciousness in society." The Center, she notes, will develop educational programs and the training of professional mediators. In this spirit, it has adopted the motto that "Reconciliation is better than legal proceedings."<sup>15</sup>

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[https://forbes.kz/process/nazarbaev\\_etnicheskie\\_konfliktyi\\_neredko\\_vedut\\_k\\_raspadu\\_gosudars\\_tv\\_obnovlyaetsya/](https://forbes.kz/process/nazarbaev_etnicheskie_konfliktyi_neredko_vedut_k_raspadu_gosudars_tv_obnovlyaetsya/)

<sup>13</sup> "25 лет АНК: Курсы народной дипломатии в Костанайском регионе," *Assembly.kz*, August 26, 2019. <https://assembly.kz/ru/news/25-let-ank-kursy-narodnoy-diplomatii-v-kostanayskom-regione/>

<sup>14</sup> "Курсы народной дипломатии" *Central Asia Monitor*, August 22, 2018. <https://camonitor.kz/33559-kursy-narodnoy-diplomatii.html>

<sup>15</sup> "Примириться Лучше, Чем Судиться: В Казахстане Впервые Центр Медиации Открыли В Частном Вузе" *Assembly.kz*, March 13, 2019. <https://assembly.kz/ru/news/primiritsya-luchshe-chem-suditsya-v-kazakhstan-vpervye-tsentr-mediatsii-otkryli-v-chastnom-vuze/>

## **First steps: Nuclear Diplomacy and Eurasian Economic Integration**

The early 1990s saw the development of several key steps in Kazakhstan's foreign policy. The two major elements, both of which helped shape the country's approach to international affairs, were its handling of nuclear weapons, and its advocacy for Eurasian economic integration. The first helped Kazakhstan develop its relationship with the outside world, while the second led it to maintain the most productive elements of its relationship with Russia.

The Semipalatinsk nuclear test site was the heart of the Soviet nuclear weapons program. The emergence of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk movement in the 1980s brought global attention to the Soviet government's disregard for the human effects of radiation emanating from this test site.<sup>16</sup> The collapse of the Soviet Union left Kazakhstan with the fourth-largest nuclear arsenal in the world, and there were both domestic and foreign voices that urged Nazarbayev to maintain this arsenal as a guarantor of Kazakhstan's security. Not least, voices from the Muslim world, like Libyan leader Moammar Ghaddafi, urged Kazakhstan to keep a "Muslim bomb" and offered billions of dollars in support for this purpose.<sup>17</sup> Nazarbayev never took these entreaties seriously, particularly given Kazakhstani society's strong opposition to nuclear weapons as such, based on the Semipalatinsk experience. Instead, Kazakhstan resolved to give up its nuclear weapons. Nuclear missiles on its territory were sent to Russia, and fissile materials to the United States. By April 1995, Kazakhstan had returned all its nuclear

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<sup>16</sup> Cynthia Werner and Kathleen Purvis-Roberts, "Unraveling the secrets of the past: contested versions of nuclear testing in the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan", in Barbara Johnston, ed, "Half Lives and Half Truths: Confronting the Radioactive Legacies of the Cold War", Albuquerque, NM: School of American Research Press, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> "Gaddafi offered Nazarbayev to preserve nuclear weapons, Tokayev", *KazInform*, November 29, 2012. [https://www.inform.kz/en/gaddafi-offered-nazarbayev-to-preserve-nuclear-weapons-tokayev\\_a2514354](https://www.inform.kz/en/gaddafi-offered-nazarbayev-to-preserve-nuclear-weapons-tokayev_a2514354)

warheads and ICBMs to Russia and had dismantled the seven heavy bombers it had inherited.<sup>18</sup>

In return, Kazakhstan did not receive either security guarantees or large-scale financial support. True, in the 1994 Budapest memorandums the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia committed to respect the territorial integrity of Kazakhstan, and also Belarus and Ukraine, as well as to refrain from the use or threat of force against these states after they agreed to join the Non-Proliferation Treaty as non-nuclear states. But the memorandum does not compel the signatories to intervene militarily if the memorandum is breached, as actually occurred when Russia annexed Crimea and subsequently invaded eastern Ukraine. It appears that Kazakhstan's leaders from the outset understood, as they abandoned their nuclear arsenal, that ironclad security guarantees were not a realistic prospect. They did, however, expect some level of economic support for the closing of the Semipalatinsk site and the enormous costs for environmental cleanup and healthcare. But on the tenth anniversary of the site's closure, in 2001, Nazarbayev complained that in spite of social and developmental needs at Semipalatinsk that totaled 1 billion USD, only 20 million USD in international assistance had been forthcoming.<sup>19</sup>

What Kazakhstan did achieve was international respectability – in effect, a shortcut to the inner circles of top-level international relations. The manner in which Nazarbayev managed the nuclear issue cemented his international reputation as a statesman, while also providing a level of contact with world leaders and goodwill in places like the U.S. Congress that no other post-

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<sup>18</sup> Andrew Weber and Christine Parthemore, "Lessons from Kazakhstan", *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, January 2017, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/lessons-kazakhstan>.

<sup>19</sup> Cynthia Werner and Kathleen Purvis-Roberts, "After the Cold War: international politics, domestic policy and the nuclear legacy in Kazakhstan" *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 25 no. 4, 2006, pp. 461-480.

Soviet leader could command. This underscores the point that the nuclear diplomacy of the early 1990s enhanced Kazakhstan's international legitimacy as an honest broker. In some respects, this role is similar to the role as international mediators that neutral states like Switzerland and Sweden have long played.

The second key initiative in the early years of Kazakhstan's independence was Nazarbayev's strong advocacy of Eurasian economic integration. It should be recalled that immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian government was dominated by an "Atlanticist" view that prioritized relations with the West, and saw Central Asian states as a "burden" that Russia should shed as it sought closer ties with the West. To be sure, that policy was soon abandoned in favor of a more traditional approach that sought to restore Russia's primacy over the former territories of the Soviet Union. This is the context in which Nazarbayev, in a March 1994 address at Moscow State University, advocated for the creation of a "Eurasian Economic Union."

Russia warmed to the idea of closer integration, but in practice, little happened at first. A "Customs Union" of four post-Soviet states was formed in 1995, but never materialized in practice. This failure led Kazakhstan instead to prioritize Central Asian cooperation.<sup>20</sup> But once Vladimir Putin came to power, he reorganized the Russian government and made the restoration of close ties with the post-Soviet states a priority. In 2000 he initiated what he termed the Eurasian Economic Community, to develop a more serious customs union and a free trade zone. Seven years later, Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus agreed to form a customs union, which entered into force in 2010. As Kassenova has noted, however, these developments did

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<sup>20</sup> See S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, "Modernization and Regional Cooperation in Central Asia", *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper*, November 2018. <http://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13320>



not prevent Kazakhstan's trade from expanding far beyond the states of the former USSR. While Russia had accounted for almost 50 percent of Kazakhstan's trade in 1995, by 2009 the figure had dropped to 17 percent.<sup>21</sup> Such developments in Kazakhstan and other former Soviet republics led Moscow to seek to deepen Eurasian integration by launching the Eurasian Economic Union.

This initiative posed a challenge for Kazakhstan: it carried the exact name that President Nazarbayev had suggested in 1994, but the version developed by the Kremlin had political features which Kazakhstani leaders opposed. Nazarbayev had insisted from the outset that he sought economic cooperation, not some kind of new political union. But it appeared as if the Kremlin's main concern was to ensure its continued political influence over the post-Soviet space.<sup>22</sup> This motive became clear in 2013, when Russia applied enormous pressure on Ukraine and Armenia over their intention to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. By contrast, when Armenia decided instead to join the Eurasian Economic Union, there was only limited discussion with existing members over the terms. From the outset, Kazakhstan and Belarus have taken the lead in seeking to develop the positive economic aspects of Eurasian integration within the EEU, while steadfastly resisting Russian pressures to give the organization a political or supranational character that would infringe on their sovereignty. For the same reason, Kazakhstan has also supported the idea of Uzbekistan joining the EEU, as it would add a large country that adamantly insists on maintaining its sovereignty.

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<sup>21</sup> Nargis Kassenova, "Kazakhstan and Eurasian Economic Integration: Quick Start, Mixed Results and Uncertain Future," *IFRI, Russie.Nei.Reports*, November 2012. <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ifrikassenovakazandeurasianintegrationengnov2012.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, eds., "Putin's Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and Its Discontents", Washington: *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program*, 2014. <https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/1409GrandStrategy.pdf>

Eurasian integration, then, has been a complicated balancing act for Kazakhstan. Aside from the Customs Union and EEU, Kazakhstan is also a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a body that has evolved into a military bloc. Here, too, Kazakhstan has joined with Belarus in seeking to avoid negative consequences. For example, because both value their relationship with Azerbaijan, they opposed efforts by Armenia to involve the CSTO in its dispute with Azerbaijan, with President Nazarbayev playing a key role in this regard.<sup>23</sup> More importantly, however, Kazakhstan has consistently sought to balance its membership in Russian-led institutions with an independent and assertive foreign policy. It was in this context that Kazakhstan would elaborate the notion of a multi-vector policy.

### **Emergence of Kazakhstan's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy**

Since independence, Central Asian states have faced a geopolitical environment characterized by structural instability. Its first element is the differential size, resources, and power between regional states and their neighbors. Regional states are all small or mid-sized countries; surrounding states are all major powers with large populations and assertive foreign policies, who possess or aspire to possess nuclear weapons. Crucially, all surrounding powers, as well as the United States and Europe, have interests in Central Asia – but none considers its interests in the region to be primary. All have higher priorities elsewhere: Russia still focuses on Eastern Europe as well as China; China looks to Northeast and Southern Asia; while India's main focus is on its South Asian neighborhood, including Pakistan; and Pakistan continues to prioritize its vexed relations with India and Afghanistan. As a result, the activities of most powers in the region are characterized by irregular efforts or short-term initiatives rather than

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<sup>23</sup> Joshua Kucera, "At Summit, CSTO Wrestles with Internal Disputes, Irrelevance," *Eurasianet*, October 17, 2016; Kucera, "Armenia Appears in Danger of Losing CSTO Leadership Position," *Eurasianet*, November 9, 2018.

consistent strategies.<sup>24</sup> In recent years, China has come closest to articulating a long-term strategy through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), but reality remains that the BRI is global in nature and the Chinese leadership's attention to Central Asia is to a large extent a function of developments in areas more central to its interests.

It should be noted that Central Asia's geostrategic importance has not gone unnoticed in the West. In 2019, the EU presented a new Strategy for Central Asia, which raises the level of EU involvement in the region significantly.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, a new U.S. Strategy was being developed, and launched in early 2020, adopting a similarly constructive approach to cooperation with Central Asian states.<sup>26</sup>

Secondly, Central Asia itself lacks functioning security institutions. In the past thirty years, attempts have been made to impose security structures from outside: Russia's Collective Security Treaty Organization is the best example, but only three regional states are members, and the most populous states of the region, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, remain outside. While there are Russian military bases in CSTO member states Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, there are none in Kazakhstan.

China has promoted the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), but the SCO has grown beyond the region by admitting India and Pakistan. While it serves as a discussion forum that to some extent helps regulate the relations among regional powers, it does not provide security for Central

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<sup>24</sup> Svante E. Cornell, "Finding Balance: The Foreign Policies of Central Asian States," in Ashley Tellis & Michael Wills, eds., *Strategic Asia 2007-08: Domestic Political Change and Grand Strategy*, Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2007, pp. 267-298.

<sup>25</sup> Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, "A Steady Hand: The EU 2019 Strategy and Policy Toward Central Asia", *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper*, November 2019. <http://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13345>

<sup>26</sup> S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, "A New Strategy for Central Asia," *The Hill*, February 18, 2020. (<http://silkroadstudies.org/publications/joint-center-publications/item/13358>)

Asian states. And while cooperation among Central Asian states is developing rapidly, it is not primarily in the sensitive field of security.<sup>27</sup> Even if Central Asian regional cooperation is institutionalized, much like in the case of Southeast Asian or Nordic cooperation, it is likely to focus at first on areas other than security issues.

This reality has posed serious challenges for all Central Asian states in the formulation of their foreign policies. For many years after the fall of the USSR the region's geopolitics were viewed largely as a "New Great Game" in which the actors were not Central Asian states but the surrounding powers. Initially, the new regional states were being told they were the object of a zero-sum game where they could win only by casting their lot irrevocably with one party or another.<sup>28</sup> Thus, for example, Tajikistan initially relied on Russia for its security; Uzbekistan did the opposite, seeking to oppose Russia's regional dominance and instead sought a relationship with the United States. But it soon emerged that this type of alignments did not serve the interest of regional states. Turkmenistan was perhaps the first to realize this, adopting a policy of "permanent neutrality" that essentially rejected involvement in any geopolitics whatsoever. But this meant formulating foreign policy in an essentially negative way, emphasizing what the country would not do rather than what it would do, and led to a certain isolation from the region as a whole. Only very recently are there signs of new thinking in Ashgabat.

Kazakhstan, however, under the leadership of President Nazarbayev and then-Foreign Minister Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, developed a new strategy for dealing with this complex reality, one that would eventually be adopted

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<sup>27</sup> Starr and Cornell, "Modernization and Regional Cooperation in Central Asia".

<sup>28</sup> S. Frederick Starr, "In Defense of Greater Central Asia", Policy Paper, *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program*, September 2008, p. 15.

[https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2008\\_09\\_PP\\_Starr\\_Greater-Central-Asia.pdf](https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2008_09_PP_Starr_Greater-Central-Asia.pdf)

to some extent by all regional states. It had the same goal as Uzbekistan's policy – to balance Russian dominance in order to safeguard and consolidate independence. Tashkent, too, resisted Russia's revanchist pressures, but for many years it did so on an ad hoc basis, adjusting its other alignments as necessary. Kazakhstan's sought instead a comprehensive approach based on the concept of *positive* balance, i.e., by balancing good relations with Russia with good relations with China and by balancing its relations with both Russia and China with good relations with the United States and Europe. On this basis, which then-Foreign Minister Tokayev laid out in a 1997 book, Kazakhstan moved to develop its relations with China.<sup>29</sup> Traditional fears of China arising from ethnic differences and concerns over Maoism persisted among the new Central Asian elites. Nevertheless, as Nazarbayev explained in the chapter on national security in his text *Kazakhstan 2030*, adopted in 1997:

To ensure our independence and territorial integrity, we must be a strong state and maintain friendly relations with our neighbours, which is why we shall develop and consolidate relations of confidence and equality with our closest and historically equal neighbour—Russia. Likewise we shall develop just as confident and good-neighbourly relations with the PRC [People's Republic of China] on a mutually advantageous basis. Kazakhstan welcomes the policy pursued by China for it is aimed against hegemonism and favours friendship with neighbouring countries.<sup>30</sup>

This description of China as a non-hegemonic power clearly reflects the balancing act that underlay Kazakhstan's new strategy. In the Central Asian context, "hegemony" could only be understood as referring to Russian domination. Kazakhstan continuously developed its relationship with its

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<sup>29</sup> Tokayev, "*Pod Styagom Nezavisimosti*". Also S. Frederick Starr, "Kazakhstan's Security Strategy: A Model for Central Asia?" *Central Asia Affairs*, no. 3, January 2007, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> See "Kazakhstan 2030," *Embassy of Kazakhstan to the United States and Canada website*, <http://kazakhembus.com/Kazakhstan2030.html>; emphasis added

great eastern neighbor, despite concerns of future Chinese economic domination of the region.

At the same time, it worked to maintain cordial relations with Russia. In 1997, Tokayev explicitly used the term “balance” in describing Kazakhstan’s foreign relations, noting the strategic relationships with both Russia and China. Following this, Kazakhstan sought to broaden its energy security by agreeing to and eventually building (against Moscow’s wishes) an oil pipeline to China, completed in 2005. Gradually, and without the use of harsh rhetoric, Kazakhstan asserted its sovereignty and independence. The challenge for Kazakhstan was to balance the multiple strategic partnerships in ways that were mutually beneficial, that minimized or curtailed the worst tendencies of each partner, and that in the end strengthened the sovereignty and independence of Kazakhstan itself. Because the strategy viewed each strategic partner as complementary to the other, both relationships, and the relation between them, had to be based on trust. All this required delicacy and finesse on Kazakhstan’s part.<sup>31</sup>

Developments in the late 1990s posed challenges to the strategy developed by Messrs. Nazarbayev and Tokayev. In particular, the rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing led to fears of a Russian-Chinese condominium in Central Asia, and prompted an outreach to external powers. In practice, it led Kazakhstan to seek to deepen its ties with the West. Even before September 11, 2001, Kazakhstan moved rapidly in this direction. In 2002, it signed a strategic partnership with the United States, thus adding a third balancing component to its foreign policy.<sup>32</sup> Following 9/11, Kazakhstan expressed support for the United States and offered the use of its airspace, though Kazakhstan’s geographical distance from Afghanistan meant that the question of a U.S. military base was not

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<sup>31</sup> Starr, “Kazakhstan’s Security Strategy: A Model for Central Asia?” p.8.

<sup>32</sup> Starr, “Kazakhstan’s Security Strategy: A Model for Central Asia?” p.9.

seriously broached. Moreover, while all Central Asian countries have developed cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and cooperate in Partnership for Peace (Tashkent also hosts the NATO liaison officer for Central Asia) Kazakhstan was also the only Central Asian state to develop a relationship with NATO to the point of submitting an Individual Partnership Action Plan, accepted in 2006.<sup>33</sup>

Western support for “color revolutions” in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, as well as Western backing of the Arab upheavals of 2011, led to concerns among Central Asian elites that Western powers were intent on seeking regime change also in their region, and thus led to the conclusion that this trend could threaten Central Asia’s own stability. This temporarily led Central Asian leaders to dampen their outreach to the West, and to deepen relations with Moscow and Beijing.<sup>34</sup> But such concerns soon dissipated, while the decline of oil prices in 2014 generated a fresh urge for reform in the region. This led to a redoubling of the outreach to Europe and the United States, which Kazakhstan viewed as important partners for economic and institutional reforms. Thus, Kazakhstan negotiated an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union in 2015, and successfully proposed to the Obama administration that the U.S. create a mechanism for regional consultations, known as the C5+1.

The notion of positive balance between great powers and a multi-vectored foreign policy is central to Kazakhstan’s role in the world. Accordingly, it

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<sup>33</sup> See Roger McDermott, “Kazakhstan’s Partnership with NATO: Strengths, Limits and Prognosis,” *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 5, no. 1, February 2007: pp. 7–20.

<sup>34</sup> Pavel K. Baev, “Turning Counter-Terrorism into Counter-Revolution: Russia Focuses on Kazakhstan and Engages Turkmenistan,” *European Security*, vol. 15, no. 1, March 2006; Stephen Blank, “Kazakhstan’s Foreign Policy in a Time of Turmoil,” *Eurasianet*, April 27, 2005; Joshua Foust, “Seeing Revolution Everywhere: The ‘Kazakhstan Spring’ That Isn’t,” *Atlantic*, December 20, 2011.

also underlies its engagement in multilateral institutions.<sup>35</sup> Over time, all this legitimized and enhanced Kazakhstan's ability to serve as a facilitator of international dialogue.

### **President Nazarbayev's International Role**

Historians and theorists of international relations have long debated the role of individual leaders in foreign policy. Whatever one's view on this issue, there can be no doubt that Nursultan Nazarbayev's personal role was crucial to the development of both Kazakhstan's domestic and international identity. Following Kazakhstan's independence, a welter of domestic challenges faced the country's new leaders and dominated their attention. Besides the need to draft a new constitution, create new institutions in many fields, including foreign relations, and devise a strategy for privatization, Kazakhstan faced centrifugal pressures that had the potential to destroy its newly won sovereignty. These concerns demanded decisive leadership and underlay the President's decision not to rush to liberalize the political system. Western impatience on this point, which was shared by some elements of the Kazakhstani populace, posed a continuing challenge.<sup>36</sup> A further issue that was to prove obstinate was the prevalence of corruption. Widespread in Soviet times and common to all the former Soviet states, corruption endured and took new forms that challenged the government and complicated relations with well-wishers in the West. No wonder that

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<sup>35</sup> Johan Engvall and Svante E. Cornell, "Fourth Vector: Making Sense of Kazakhstan's Activism in International Organizations," *ISDP Policy Brief*, no. 189, December 17, 2015. [https://isdpeu/content/uploads/2015/12/2015-engvall-cornell-kazakhstans-activism-in-international\\_organizations.pdf](https://isdpeu/content/uploads/2015/12/2015-engvall-cornell-kazakhstans-activism-in-international_organizations.pdf)

<sup>36</sup> For example, works such as Joanna Lillis, "Dark Shadows: Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan", London: *IB Tauris*, 2018; Alexander Cooley and John Heathershaw, "Dictators without Borders: Power and Money in Central Asia", New Haven: *Yale University Press*, 2017.



President Tokayev, in his 2020 state of the nation speech, identified corruption as a key problem facing the nation.<sup>37</sup>

Notwithstanding these concerns, Kazakhstan's gradualist model of development has gained positive recognition, especially following the instability, turmoil and regime change that took place in certain other post-Soviet countries and in the Middle East. Kazakhstan instead prioritized economic development, strict regulation, and consensus among the elite, not just as ends in themselves but as essential first steps towards gradual political reform. This model owes much to the vision of Kazakhstan's First President. The same gradualism characterized his management of the thorny issue of succession, which in Kazakhstan avoided the risk of struggles among rival elite groups.

The stature of Kazakhstan's First President on the international scene owes much to his ability simultaneously to balance good relations with all the great powers that take an interest in Central Asia. Within the region itself, Nazarbayev's long tenure in office proved to be an important asset in a region where seniority is valued and respected. Over nearly a third of a century, foreign interlocutors have come to understand that Kazakhstan seeks to strengthen its sovereignty by actively supporting cooperative solutions to international problems.

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<sup>37</sup> "President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's State of the Nation Address" September 1, 2020. [https://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/addresses\\_of\\_president/president-of-kazakhstan-kassym-jomart-tokayevs-state-of-the-nation-address-september-1-2020](https://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/addresses_of_president/president-of-kazakhstan-kassym-jomart-tokayevs-state-of-the-nation-address-september-1-2020)

## **Kazakhstan's Multilateral Diplomacy: CICA, UN, OSCE**

An important building block of Kazakhstan's foreign policy has been its active role in multilateral diplomacy. Three initiatives stand out: the establishment of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building in Asia; Kazakhstan's successful bid to chair the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe; and its more recent stint as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council.

### **Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building in Asia**

Shortly after independence, Kazakhstan took a bold step to advance its position in Asian affairs. In his first speech to the UN General Assembly on October 5, 1992, President Nazarbayev put forward the idea of a Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia. His vision was modeled on the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which would in 1994 become the OSCE. He sought to build a similar structure for the Asian continent to ensure peace and security in Asia, where such structures were lacking.

Initial responses to the proposal from other Asian states were lukewarm, with skeptics thinking "the idea was not workable because of the extreme diversity of the continent and existence of multiple flash points with significant conflict potential."<sup>38</sup> Nazarbayev nonetheless pushed steadily forward. A first meeting in Almaty in 1996 brought together deputy foreign ministers from fifteen countries, who reported on their governments' commitment to the new initiative. Three years later, a first meeting of CICA

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<sup>38</sup> Dulat Bakishev, "Asian Security: A Way Forward," *International Journal of Non-Aligned Movement*, May 2, 2009, [http://www.s-cica.org/news\\_detail/?newsid=4](http://www.s-cica.org/news_detail/?newsid=4).

Ministers of Foreign Affairs was held, and in 2002 the First CICA Summit convened in Almaty and adopted the CICA Charter.<sup>39</sup>

CICA was a bold and unlikely initiative. It doubtless startled many Asian officials, as it was initiated by a little-known country heretofore known mainly by its links with Russia through the Soviet Union. Today CICA includes 27 member states and eight observers, and pursues confidence-building measures in the spheres of economic cooperation and trade, environmental issues, human security, conventional military-political issues, the management of borders, and such non-traditional security threats as organized crime and terrorism.<sup>40</sup>

Kazakhstan held CICA's chairmanship from 2002 to 2010, when it passed to Turkey. From 2014 to 2018, China took over, with Tajikistan holding it for two years until it reverted to Kazakhstan in 2020. At the 2014 CICA Summit in Shanghai, Nazarbayev took CICA's logic a step further by proposing to transform CICA into the Organization for Security and Development in Asia. He argued that an essential step towards addressing the multifaceted security challenges confronting Asia would be to foster economic progress.<sup>41</sup> Kazakhstan is expected to promote the transformation of CICA into an international organization during the Kazakh Chairmanship of CICA in 2020-2022.

### **Kazakhstan's 2010 OSCE Presidency**

Kazakhstan in 2004 announced its goal of obtaining the OSCE's rotating chairmanship. This bold step was proposed as part of Kazakhstan's "Path to Europe" foreign policy pillar, which was in turn linked with the concept

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<sup>39</sup> Kassymzhomart Tokaev, "Meeting the Challenge: Memoirs by Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister", New York: *Global Scholarly Publications*, 2004, 289, 292.

<sup>40</sup> Secretariat of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, [www.s-cica.org/](http://www.s-cica.org/)

<sup>41</sup> Almashov, "CICA Summit in Shanghai."

of balance. Astana's bid was strongly supported by the eastern members of the organization and by Russia. Up to this time no former Soviet state had ever held the chairmanship.<sup>42</sup>

Those opposed to Kazakhstan's chairmanship cited what they considered its negative record in human rights and its democratic deficit.<sup>43</sup> To overcome these divisions and secure consensus for its bid posed a serious challenge for Astana. Kazakhstan's strategy was to frame itself as a central country for security and stability, and to position itself as a bridge between the OSCE's western and eastern members. While Kazakhstan was criticized for its human rights record, it also managed to present itself as a stable multiethnic country on a course to gradual democratic reforms.<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, at the OSCE's 2007 Ministerial Council meeting in Madrid, a unanimous vote of the 56 member states conferred the chairmanship for 2010 on Kazakhstan.

Concerns that the OSCE's work on democratic institutions and human rights would be constrained turned out to be unfounded, as it was able to continue to operate as previously. Indeed, in 2010, the OSCE organized four election-monitoring missions in CIS countries. As for the general effectiveness of Kazakhstan's chairmanship, the U.S.-Kazakhstan OSCE Task Force concluded that "Kazakhstan provided capable and energetic leadership for the organization at a difficult time in its evolution", and that a major achievement was bringing the attention of the OSCE to Central Asia and emphasizing its Eurasian dimension, including the Afghanistan conflict.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Margit Hellwig-Bötte, "Kazakhstan's OSCE Chairmanship – The Road to Europe?", *OSCE Yearbook 12*, 2008, p.179.

<sup>43</sup> Jos Bonstra, "OSCE Democracy Promotion: Grinding to a Halt?", *FRIDE Working Paper 44*, October 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Murat Laumulin, "Kazakhstan's OSCE Chairmanship: History and Challenges", IFSH, *OSCE Yearbook 14* (2010), pp.317-326.

<sup>45</sup> Janusz Bugasjki, Margarita Assenova, and Richard Weitz, "Kazakhstan's OSCE Chairmanship 2010. Final Report", *IND/CSIS, U.S.-Kazakhstan OSCE Task Force*, December 2009, pp.15-16.

During Kazakhstan's presidency, the OSCE held its first Summit in 11 years in Astana in December 2010. It marked the first time since 1999, when an OSCE summit had been held in Istanbul, that the body convened at the highest level. The Summit adopted an "Astana Declaration" reiterating the OSCE's principles and committing the member states to work toward the goal of a security community. Importantly, that declaration reaffirmed each state's freedom to choose its security arrangements, including opting for treaties of alliance as well as neutrality.

The presidency gave Kazakhstan the opportunity to demonstrate its ability to effectively organize a chairmanship of a major international organization. However, it also drew the attention of western states and NGOs to its internal political conditions. Overall, however, Kazakhstan showed adequate attention to the human dimension of the OSCE and managed to advance the legitimacy of the OSCE across its large membership.

### **Kazakhstan's Bid for Non-Permanent Membership in the United Nations Security Council**

In June 2010, in the middle of its OSCE presidency, Kazakhstan made public its interest in seeking a non-permanent seat in the United Nation's Security Council (UNSC) for 2017-2018. Three years later, the government of Kazakhstan launched its campaign on behalf of its candidacy. Its platform focused on four spheres of international cooperation: food security; water security; energy security; and nuclear security.<sup>46</sup> All of these were issues in which Kazakhstan had long been involved. The campaign also featured an expansion of Kazakhstan's diplomatic relations, including the establishment of six new embassies (in Brazil, Ethiopia, Kuwait, Mexico,

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<sup>46</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Kazakhstan's candidature to a non-permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council for 2017-18," Introductory Paper, June 2014, [http://www.kazakhstanunsc.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/UNSC-Introductory-Paper.pdf?dm\\_i=25TS,2IW47,FP1KG9,9781I,1](http://www.kazakhstanunsc.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/UNSC-Introductory-Paper.pdf?dm_i=25TS,2IW47,FP1KG9,9781I,1)

South Africa, and Sweden.) Moreover, Kazakhstan's Mission in New York was expanded in order to manage the workload, and it was strengthened by the appointment of Kazakhstan's permanent representative to the OSCE, Kairat Abdrakhmanov, as Permanent Representative to the UN in 2013. Later, Abdrakhmanov would serve as Minister of Foreign Affairs.

During its time at the UNSC, Kazakhstan focused its energies on nuclear non-proliferation, as well as on the conflict in Afghanistan. It also drew attention to the need for regional cooperation in Central Asia. During its Presidency of the UNSC, Kazakhstan organized a session on confidence building to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Kazakhstan also worked to promote at the UN level the linkages between Afghanistan and Central Asia, paving the way for greater recognition of Afghanistan as a historic part of Central Asia.<sup>47</sup>

### **A Multi-Vector Strategy and Multilateralism: A Strong Basis for International Mediation**

This overview of Kazakhstan's role in multilateral organizations presents just one component of the active international role the country assumed. Other noteworthy initiatives include Kazakhstan's promotion of the Council of Turkic-speaking states, its role in the Europe-Asia meeting (ASEM), its engagement with international financial institutions, its membership in the WTO, its bid for OECD membership, as well as its partnership with NATO and the European Union. The range and depth of these further involvements are the subject of the study, *Asserting Statehood:*

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<sup>47</sup> J Nastranis, "Kazakhstan Ends Successful Security Council Membership" *UN Insider*, December 24, 2018; Wilder Alejandro Sanchez, "Analyzing Kazakhstan's First Tenure at the UN Security Council," *Diplomat*, March 22, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/analyzing-kazakhstans-first-tenure-at-the-un-security-council/>

*Kazakhstan's Role in International Organizations*, published in 2015 in this series.<sup>48</sup>

All this activity and the strategy underlying it—multilateralism and a multi-vectored approach—has the effect of legitimizing Kazakhstan's self-designated role in the sphere of international mediation. Its growing profile in international institutions normalizes Kazakhstan's facilitation of dialogue on international conflicts. It is no coincidence that this has coincided with an intensification of strategic competition globally and mounting international crises in the Middle East and Eurasia. Overall, the deteriorating geopolitical landscape has given rise to a growing demand for Kazakhstan's role in bridging the gap between regional and great powers.

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<sup>48</sup> Svante E. Cornell and Johan Engvall, "Asserting Statehood: Kazakhstan's Role in International Organizations", *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper*, December 2015.

## **Kazakhstan's International Mediation Initiatives**

Kazakhstan's role as an international mediator gained visibility as a result of two initiatives: the 2013 Almaty talks on the Iranian nuclear program, and the Astana talks on Syria from 2017 onward. But Kazakhstan has been involved in a much larger number of initiatives, starting from the earliest days of the country's independence. Already in late 1991 President Nazarbayev sought to mediate the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. And in quite recent times Kazakhstan has worked to resolve the crisis in Ukraine and launched an initiative to bridge Turkish-Russian relations. A survey of some of these initiatives will make clear what kind of international situations best lend themselves to Kazakhstan's mode of mediation and the diverse methods through which it has sought to fulfill that role.

### **The Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict**

The most serious conflict in the late Soviet era broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1987. Nagorno-Karabakh had long been an autonomous region of Azerbaijan, with a majority Armenian population. Assertive Armenian demands for the territory to be transferred to Armenia posed a serious challenge to the Soviet leadership. Moscow feared that the transfer of territory from one Soviet republic to another on the basis of the wishes of a minority population could inspire others to seek the same, leading to a cascade of similar struggles over territory and sovereignty. While the Soviet federation was loosely based on ethnicity, there were scores of instances where borders between republics did not conform to ethnic settlement patterns. Thus, were Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities in Georgia,



Russian minorities in Ukraine and Kazakhstan, a Tajik minority in Uzbekistan, and Uzbek minorities in all Central Asian states – and so on.

In other words, the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict risked leading to wider demands for the redrawing of boundaries, which would almost certainly result in widespread armed conflict and bloodshed. Given Kazakhstan's delicate demographic situation, it was an issue of considerable concern for Mr. Nazarbayev. In fact, his decision to intervene and seek to resolve the conflict was the first example of his ardor for relieving strife through mediation. Rejecting the role of a passive observer, he tried to affect the situation positively, whether or not the conditions appeared ripe for success. Kazakhstan chose to engage as a mediator because the proximity of the conflict posed a national security threat for Kazakhstan and its neighborhood. Because he had good relations with the leaders of both Armenia and Azerbaijan Nazarbayev was able to assume the role of a neutral mediator.

Between September 20- 23, 1991, Nursultan Nazarbayev and Boris Yeltsin, along with their mediating missions, conducted shuttle diplomacy between Armenia and Azerbaijan in order to negotiate an agreement on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The negotiations proved to be effective at first. A notable breakthrough came on September 22, when Armenia renounced its claims to Azerbaijani territory.<sup>49</sup> A joint statement was formed, known as the Zheleznovodsk Communiqué, and all the relevant parties signed a ceasefire on September 25.<sup>50</sup> However, the strides made during these negotiations soon dissipated. By the following month fighting had been

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<sup>49</sup> Bill Keller, "Armenia Yielding Claim on Enclave," *New York Times*, September 23, 1991; Rusif Huseynov. "Stosunki Azerbejdżan–Kazachstan: Obecna Sytuacja i Perspektywy," *Przegląd Politologiczny*, no. 3, 2017, pp. 139-160.

<sup>50</sup> "From the Archives: The Russia-Kazakhstan Mediation in Karabakh," *USC Institute of Armenian Studies*, September 23, 2018. <https://armenian.usc.edu/the-zheleznovodsk-communicue-when-armenia-agreed-to-karabakh-autonomy-in-azerbaijan/>

renewed and the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan planned to meet together, with Russians and Kazakhstanis present in the role of observers. An Azerbaijani helicopter was to carry the Russian and Kazakhstani observers and also Azerbaijan's Minister of Internal Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister to the negotiations.<sup>51</sup> This aircraft was shot down on route to the negotiations, killing all aboard. Azerbaijan responded in November by boycotting the talks, and peace negotiations were shelved.

There are two reasons for which Kazakhstani peace efforts did not succeed in resolving the conflict. First, Baku and Yerevan lacked firm control over their own military units on the frontlines, a situation exacerbated by the murky role played by legacy Soviet armed forces. Second, it is questionable whether Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders were themselves interested in ending the conflict at this early stage.<sup>52</sup>

In November 1992, President Nazarbayev attempted again to restart peace negotiations. Armenia rejected his proposal on the grounds that Nazarbayev supported the principle of the territorial integrity of sovereign states and rejected Armenia's argument that the principle of national self-determination should permit the secession of Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>53</sup> It is worth noting that Nazarbayev's position is firmly embedded in international law and was to be supported by all subsequent international negotiators.

In 1992, the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe established the tripartite Minsk Group and charged it with mediating the conflict. In 1994, following on negotiations led by Minsk Group chairman Jan Eliasson,

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<sup>51</sup> Nicholas Miller, "Nagorno-Karabakh: A War Without Peace," in Kristen Eichensehr and W. Michael Reisman, "Stopping Wars and Making Peace: Studies in International Intervention", Leiden: *Martinus Nijhoff*, 2009, p. 55.

<sup>52</sup> Huseynov, "Stosunki Azerbejdžan–Kazachstan."

<sup>53</sup> Moorad Mooradian, "Third Party Mediations and Missed Opportunities in Nagorno Karabakh: A Design for a Possible Solution", *George Mason University*, 1996.

a ceasefire agreement was signed – but under Russian leadership.<sup>54</sup> However, over the years the Minsk Group proved to be remarkably inept at finding a solution to the conflict. It proposed several peace plans that went nowhere, and its principles for resolving the conflict avoided core issues.

What caused this stasis? Differences among the three countries that served as co-chairs since 1997 – Russia, France, and the United States – undermined the Minsk Group's effectiveness. Over several decades the Minsk Group was reduced to offering passive support for dialogue between the parties. Further vitiating that body, the Minsk Group has always been comprised of mid-level diplomats who lack the standing to advance proposals, even in the unlikely case that they reached significant agreement.

The ineffectiveness of the Minsk Group led to calls for Kazakhstan once again to assume the role of mediator in the conflict. Scholars have noted that Kazakhstan's geopolitical position and diplomatic leadership in the region made the country a viable candidate to mediate, and suggested establishing a negotiation platform in Almaty or Astana.<sup>55</sup> Kazakhstan has repeatedly offered its good offices, first during its OSCE presidency and, more recently, following the outbreak of renewed violence in September 2020.

### **The 2010 Kyrgyz Crisis**

Kazakhstan's OSCE Presidency also coincided with the April 2010 forcible change of leadership in the neighboring Kyrgyz Republic. This posed both opportunities and challenges to Kazakhstan: on one hand, Kazakhstan knew its neighbor's troubled politics very well, but on the other, Kyrgyzstan had grown increasingly sensitive to the growing disparities of wealth and

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<sup>54</sup> Bahar Başer, "Third Party Mediation in Nagorno-Karabagh: Part of the Cure or Part of the Disease?" *Journal of Central Asian and Caucasian Studies*, vol. 3 no. 5, 2008, pp. 86-114.

<sup>55</sup> Andrei Galiev, "Kazakhstan as a platform for holding talks on settlement of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict" *The Caucasus & Globalization*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2012, pp. 28-34.

stature between the two kindred countries, while various disputes concerning border trade had also arisen between them.

Kyrgyzstan had grown increasingly unstable during the presidency of Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who had come to power in 2005 through a revolution that unseated his predecessor, Askar Akayev. Hopes for a fresh start quickly dimmed, however, as members of Bakiyev's family rose to key positions and appropriated control over major economic assets. Bakiyev also proved incapable of balancing the difficult geopolitics of the region. Worse, he was indecisive. In February 2009, during a visit to Moscow, he had declared his intention to close the American air base at Manas, a key Russian priority. However, when America strongly objected to his decision, he backed down. A flagging economy then compounded Bakiyev's problems: early in 2010 his government announced greatly increased prices for utilities, which precipitated mass demonstrations that eventually overthrew his government.

The collapse of law and order resulting from the overthrow of Kyrgyzstan's government posed an immediate challenge for all its neighbors. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan temporarily closed their borders with the country. The interim government in Bishkek immediately criticized Kazakhstan's action on the grounds that it would further cripple the Kyrgyz economy. Meanwhile, Bakiyev's decision to use armed force against demonstrators led to scores of deaths and several hundred hospitalizations. When Bakiyev then took refuge in his native region in southern Kyrgyzstan, the possibility of a north-south civil war appeared increasingly real.<sup>56</sup>

This episode happened to coincide with the Nuclear Summit in Washington DC, at which President Nazarbayev consulted with U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. Following these

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<sup>56</sup> Interview with H.E. Kairat Abdrakhmanov, Ambassador of Kazakhstan to Sweden and Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2016 to 2018, November 2020.

consultations, Kazakhstan dispatched a military plane, which whisked Bakiyev and his immediate family to the city of Taraz in southern Kazakhstan.<sup>57</sup> Kyrgyzstan's interim government had agreed to this plan, even though it sought Bakiyev's arrest so that he would face charges over the bloodletting in Bishkek. The removal of Bakiyev from the scene temporarily defused the situation. In June, however, southern Kyrgyzstan became the scene of ethnic riots, which laid bare the fragility of the situation there.

At this moment Kazakhstan received timely assistance from the government of Belarus, which offered asylum to Bakiyev. The new Kyrgyz government still sought to extradite the former president. But the fact that he was by then in Belarus not only disentangled Kazakhstan from the issue of Bakiyev's departure but enabled it to forge a positive relationship with the new leadership in Bishkek, even as it expressed its displeasure at the continuing political volatility and disorder there. Predictably, the refusal of the government in Minsk to extradite Bakiyev led to a serious deterioration of Belarus-Kyrgyz relations.

Few observers took note of Kazakhstan's role in these developments in the Kyrgyz Republic. But several of those who did derided Kazakhstan for having exaggerated the dangers of a civil war in Kyrgyzstan and for focusing more on Kazakhstan's own image than on the substance of the matter.<sup>58</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, however, it is clear that Kazakhstan, by removing from the scene the most contentious and polarizing figure, successfully defused tensions in Bishkek and across Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, it did so only after coordinating its actions with the key world powers. This

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<sup>57</sup> "Kyrgyzstan: Bakiyev Heads for Kazakhstan," *Eurasianet*, April 15, 2010. (<https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-bakiyev-heads-for-kazakhstan>)

<sup>58</sup> Joanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan Shows More Style than Substance in Addressing Kyrgyz Crisis", *Eurasianet*, July 6, 2020. <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-shows-more-style-than-substance-in-addressing-kyrgyz-crisis>

is of particular importance, for a worsening of the situation would have invited ever more forceful interventions by external powers. Indeed, elements of the Russian leadership were eyeing a possible intervention as a pretext for setting up an additional Russian military base in the country, this time in southern Kyrgyzstan. Widely discussed at the time, such a step would have destabilized all of Central Asia and drawn both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan into the Kyrgyz vortex. At the Tashkent summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in June 2010, both Uzbekistan and China registered their strong opposition to any foreign intervention in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>59</sup>

In spite of all these efforts, large-scale violence broke out in southern Kyrgyzstan, leaving a wound in that country's history that remains unhealed to this day.<sup>60</sup> Kazakhstan's efforts to alleviate tensions within Kyrgyzstan did not succeed. But this negative judgment must be tempered by the strong likelihood that Mr. Bakiyev's continued presence in the destabilized country, combined with his strong connections with aggressive elements in the South, would have caused Kyrgyzstan to descend into full-scale civil war. As it was, the violence that occurred in the South was largely ethnic in nature, pitting Kyrgyz against Uzbeks. Had Bakiyev remained, it could easily have turned into an intra-Kyrgyz struggle as well. Powerful forces in both the South and North were already mobilizing, with one group of northerners even proposing to march on Osh to apprehend Bakiyev. Suffice it to say that polarization in Kyrgyz society had reached such a fever of intensity that only the departure of Bakiyev could relieve it. Kazakhstan deserves full credit for bringing this about.

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<sup>59</sup> Stephen Blank, "A Sino-Uzbek Axis in Central Asia?" *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, September 1, 2010. <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12123>

<sup>60</sup> Shirin Akiner, *Kyrgyzstan 2010: Conflict and Context*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper, July 2016. [http://silkroadstudies.org/resources/2016-Akiner-Kyrgyzstan\\_2010-Conflict-Context.pdf](http://silkroadstudies.org/resources/2016-Akiner-Kyrgyzstan_2010-Conflict-Context.pdf)

## Almaty Talks on the Iranian Nuclear Program

It is fitting that the first major Kazakhstani initiative to mediate at the highest level of international politics occurred in the nuclear field. Nuclear diplomacy, after all, had led to Kazakhstan's first emergence on the international scene, and Kazakhstan's active role in this regard did not end with the country's decision to forego nuclear weapons. Thus, Kazakhstan enthusiastically promoted efforts to make Central Asia a nuclear weapons free zone. Developed jointly with Uzbekistan, this proposal bore fruit in 1997 when the regional presidents, meeting in Almaty, announced their plan for a treaty banning nuclear weapons and weapons-related activity in Central Asia. The actual treaty was signed at the Semipalatinsk test site in 2006, and entered into force in 2009. Kazakhstan also cooperated with Japan to promote the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and launched a project known as ATOM (Abolish Testing, Our Mission) to support the global ratification of that treaty.

Kazakhstan, home to a fifth of the world's uranium reserves, also continued to develop its uranium industry, and is the world's third-largest exporter of uranium.<sup>61</sup> Consistent with its opposition to nuclear weapons, the government in Almaty supported steps to assure the peaceful use of atomic energy. In 2006, the U.S.-based Nuclear Threat Initiative pledged 50 million USD toward the creation of an international stockpile of Low Enriched Uranium, what became known as the international Nuclear Fuel Bank.<sup>62</sup> Several other countries also pledged support to this idea, which would free countries interested in benefiting from civilian nuclear technology from the need to enrich uranium themselves. In so doing it would also give the lie to

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<sup>61</sup> Togzhan Kassenova, "Kazakhstan's Nuclear Ambitions", *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, April 28, 2008.

<sup>62</sup> Yuri Yudin, "Multilateralization of the Nuclear Fuel Cycle: Assessing the Existing Proposals", Geneva: *United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research*, 2009.  
<https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/99705/2009-1.pdf>

any country trying to disguise its plans for nuclear weapons by claiming it was refining uranium merely for civilian use. President Nazarbayev in 2009 declared that Kazakhstan was interested in hosting such a fuel bank under the auspices of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Mr. Nazarbayev's proposal was warmly received and led U.S. President Obama to endorse the idea.<sup>63</sup> The initiative became a reality in 2017, when the IAEA Low Enriched Uranium Bank was inaugurated at the Ulba Metallurgical Plant in Oskemen.

Against this background, it was natural for Kazakhstan to take an interest in the most pressing nuclear issue of the day: Iran's nuclear program. The extent of Iran's nuclear program first became clear in August 2002, when the National Council of Resistance of Iran reported the existence of nuclear sites that the regime had failed to declare to the international community. Most important among these was a uranium enrichment facility at Natanz and a Heavy Water plant at Arak. U.S. intelligence had reportedly arrived at similar conclusions.

Following negotiations with the EU-3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom), Iran agreed to a short-term cessation of uranium enrichment. Iran, nonetheless, exploited loopholes in the agreement to continue enrichment activities. In November 2004, the CIA determined that Iran was in the process of modifying its existing missiles to carry nuclear warheads. Following the breakdown of diplomatic efforts in 2005, the United Nations Security Council began levying sanctions on the Iranian regime.

So grave was the threat of a nuclear Iran that President George W. Bush considered the possibility of a preemptive strike against Iran's undeclared enrichment facilities.<sup>64</sup> This did not take place, and the administration of Barack Obama then offered Tehran a negotiated way out while

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<sup>63</sup> Charles Digges, "Kazakhstan and White House Confirm Former Soviet Republic Lead Contender for International Fuel Bank" *Bellona.org*, April 19, 2009.

<sup>64</sup> George W. Bush, *Decision Points*, New York: Random House, 2010, p. 417.



simultaneously ramping up sanctions. However, negotiations in 2009 in Geneva and Vienna failed to make headway. More ominously, Iran then began enriching uranium to a level of 20 percent, an important step towards the production of weapons-grade uranium.<sup>65</sup> Even as negotiations continued, the United States spearheaded international sanctions designed to cripple the Iranian oil industry and other vital sectors of the Iranian economy.

Kazakhstan had long offered to facilitate talks between Iran and the international community. In 2013, Kazakhstan hosted two rounds of negotiations on Iran's nuclear program in Almaty. The talks, held on February 26-27 and April 5-6, were a continuation of the years-long process of negotiations between the Iranian government and the P5+1 – consisting of the United States, United Kingdom, France, China, Russia, and Germany.

Iran's prime goal heading into the Almaty negotiations was to reach some sort of agreement that would lessen the sanctions that were crippling the Iranian economy and especially its oil industry. From 2001 to 2011, Iranian crude oil exports had increased from 18 billion to 81 billion USD. By 2013 this figure had decreased to just 38 billion USD. Likewise, Iran's oil production fell from 4.2 million barrels per day in 2011 to just 3.2 million per day in 2013. Europe played a crucial role in this reduction, with EU imports from Iran dropping from 21 billion USD in 2011 to 40 million USD in 2013. As a result, Iran's GDP declined by seven percent in 2012 and by a further two percent in 2013, while the value of the Iranian rial fell by fifty-one percent in 2013.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> "Iran: Nuclear," *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, January 2020, <https://www.nti.org/learn/countries/iran/nuclear/>.

<sup>66</sup> Euijin Jung, "Iran Sanctions: A Successful Episode," *Peterson Institute for International Economics*, January 29, 2016, <https://www.piie.com/blogs/trade-investment-policy-watch/iran-sanctions-successful-episode>.

Notwithstanding these developments, Iranian negotiators remained unwilling to make concessions that would compromise what they considered their country's right to enrich uranium. Their stance became clear by the second round of talks in Almaty.

Heading into the Almaty talks the goal of the P5+1 countries was to continue pressuring Iran to give up its nuclear program, which they identified as having a military purpose rather than serving to develop civilian nuclear energy. The P5+1 largely maintained this stance, although the negotiators offered Tehran the face-saving gesture of dropping their demand that Iran close the Fordo enrichment plant entirely.<sup>67</sup> The P5+1 negotiators were also prepared to reduce sanctions on Iran, provided the Iranian delegation would commit to take concrete steps to cease their nuclear program. Conversely, in the absence of a tangible offer of denuclearization, the P5+1 countries were prepared to ratchet up sanctions.

Kazakhstan's motivations for hosting the talks in Almaty were closely linked to the country's unique history with nuclear weapons. Kazakh leaders believed that the Western nuclear powers lacked the standing to convince Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons program. After all, the Kazakh officials argued, the early nuclear powers had shown in the Non-Proliferation Treaty itself that they were reluctant to give up their own arsenals. By contrast, Kazakhstan could present itself to Iran as an example of the benefits of giving up nuclear weapons. Far from being an international pariah that was subjected to sanctions, Kazakhstan received important new investments and its international stature soared. Thus, Kazakhstan was uniquely positioned to demonstrate the diplomatic and

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<sup>67</sup> Steven Erlanger, "As Negotiators Ease Demands on Iran, More Nuclear Talks Are Set," *The New York Times*, February 27, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/28/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-talks.html>.

economic benefits to be gained from giving up a nuclear weapons program.<sup>68</sup>

The first round of talks held in Almaty on February 26-27, 2013, were largely positive. Iran's chief negotiator, Saeed Jalili, termed the talks "a turning point."<sup>69</sup> At the same meeting, the P5+1 group laid out its requirements for reaching an agreement with Iran on the future of its nuclear program. First, as a confidence-building measure, Iran should agree to "significantly restrict" its buildup of medium-enriched uranium that could, within a few months, be further enriched into weapons-grade material. Second, the P5+1 insisted that Iran suspend enrichment at the Fordo enrichment plant and accept conditions that would constrain its ability to quickly resume enrichment. A senior official in the Obama administration made clear that such steps would include dismantling part of the system that feeds low-enriched fuel into the plant's centrifuges, something that would take only a brief period to rebuild. This demand was a concession to Iran, as the P5+1 had earlier insisted that Iran shut down Fordo entirely. Third, to ensure that Iran would abide by the terms of any agreement, the P5+1 demanded that Iran submit to more regular and complete monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).<sup>70</sup>

In exchange, the P5+1 offered to reduce the sanctions that had been placed on Iran. However, such sanctions relief would not include oil or financial transactions, in other words, those sanctions which were most detrimental to the Iranian economy.<sup>71</sup> However, the P5+1 promised not to support any

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<sup>68</sup> Interview with H.E. Yerzhan Kazykhanov, Ambassador of Kazakhstan to the United States and Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2011 to 2012.

<sup>69</sup> "Iran Calls Eased Sanctions Offer a 'Turning Point' in Talks," *Times of Israel*, February 27, 2013, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-calls-eased-sanctions-offer-a-turning-point-in-talks/>.

<sup>70</sup> Steven Erlanger, "As Negotiators Ease Demands on Iran, More Nuclear Talks Are Set," *The New York Times*, February 27, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/28/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-talks.html>.

<sup>71</sup> "Powers to Offer Iran Sanctions Relief at Nuclear Talks," *Reuters*, February 25, 2013.

further sanctions that might be proposed by the UN Security Council or the European Union.<sup>72</sup> In order to give Minister Jalili time to present the P5+1's offer to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the sides agreed to meet again in Almaty between April 5-6, with lower-level talks scheduled for Istanbul in the meanwhile.<sup>73</sup>

Despite the cautious optimism exhibited by both sides at the conclusion of the February talks in Almaty, the April 5-6 talks failed to produce anything concrete. In response to the P5+1's February offer, the Iranian negotiators countered with a proposal that demanded both the lifting of major sanctions and the recognition of Iran's right to pursue nuclear development. The P5+1 negotiators dismissed the provisions as merely a recycled version of Iran's positions during previous rounds of negotiations. With Iran continuing to reject calls to give up its nuclear program, the Obama administration made clear it would continue to ramp up the sanctions regime, ceasing only if Tehran took "concrete steps and concrete actions."<sup>74</sup> With the two sides at an impasse on the substance of any potential agreement, no future meetings were scheduled. President Nazarbayev announced that he would support the continuation of negotiations at another location if that would serve the interests of a deal.<sup>75</sup>

The situation changed with the election of Hassan Rouhani as Iran's new president. Rouhani, a former Chief Nuclear Negotiator, succeeded the abrasive and inflexible Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Rouhani's election could only have proceeded with the consent of Iran's Supreme Leader. Whether he was moved by Iran's growing economic difficulties, the credible risk of

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> "Positive' Iran Nuclear Talks End in Almaty," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, February 27, 2013, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-nuclear-almaty-talks/24913805.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Ivan Watson and Laura Smith-Spark, "Iran Nuclear Talks: Countries to Regroup after Little Progress," *CNN*, April 6, 2013, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/04/06/world/asia/iran-nuclear-talks/index.html>.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with H.E. Yerzhan Kazykhanov.

military action, or by other factors, he appeared to have adopted a more conciliatory approach.

During the same period the U.S. and Iran had met separately and secretly in Oman to seek a way out of the deadlock. This paved the way for continued formal negotiations in Geneva. There the two sides achieved what appeared to be a breakthrough, signing the Joint Plan of Action on November 24. Under the terms of this agreement, Iran agreed to halt the medium-grade enrichment of uranium for an initial period of six months; not to begin enrichment at any new reactor sites; and to submit to enhanced monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

In return, the P5+1 promised to suspend sanctions on “Iran’s petrochemical exports and associated services,” and to halt sanctions that targeted Iran’s auto industry and other vital sectors. Additionally, the P5+1 promised to open means for channeling humanitarian aid into Iran.<sup>76</sup> Then followed two more years of negotiations, as a result of which the P5+1 and Iran reached a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Signed on July 14, 2015 and implemented from January 2016, the JCPOA ended more than a decade of stalemate.<sup>77</sup>

The Trump administration reviewed this agreement and found what it considered severe deficiencies. Among these were the fact that the curtailment of most of Iran’s nuclear activities would be only temporary, with “sunset provisions” beginning to expire already in 2020;<sup>78</sup> that after a decade Iran would essentially be free to restart a nuclear weapons program;

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<sup>76</sup> “Joint Plan of Action,” *United States Department of the Treasury*, November 24, 2013, <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/jpoa.pdf>.

<sup>77</sup> Julian Borger, “Iran Nuclear Deal Reached in Vienna,” *The Guardian*, July 14, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/14/iran-nuclear-deal-expected-to-be-announced-in-vienna>.

<sup>78</sup> John Hannah, “Defusing the Iran Deal’ Ticking Time Bomb,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, June 19, 2016, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2016/07/19/defusing-the-iran-deals-ticking-time-bomb/>.

and that the deal allowed Iran to recoup at least 50 billion USD in liquid assets that it largely invested in its destabilizing activities in conflict zones like Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen.<sup>79</sup> These considerations prompted the U.S. to leave the JCPOA in May 2018.

In the end, Kazakhstan did not host the signing of any agreements between Iran and the international community. However, it is difficult to see how the JCPOA, for all its strengths and weaknesses, could have been achieved without the Almaty talks. Not only did they play an important role in breaking the deadlock in negotiations; they paved the way for direct talks between Iran and Washington, which in turn made the Geneva talks possible.

The terms of the JCPOA required Iran to decrease its stock of enriched uranium to a level from which it would take at least a year to accumulate enough for use in a nuclear weapon. But the parties still faced the question of where to deposit Iran's enriched uranium. Given its history, Kazakhstan emerged as the natural choice. With the close monitoring by the IAEA, it would be virtually impossible for uranium held in Kazakhstan to be secreted back to Iran.<sup>80</sup> Ultimately, Iran shipped its highly-enriched uranium to Russia, but Kazakhstan still played a role, sending 60 tons of raw uranium to Iran in exchange.<sup>81</sup>

President Nazarbayev has been a consistent voice for preserving the JCPOA in the face of all criticism and doubts about the document. In late 2015, he

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<sup>79</sup> "Written Testimony of Adam J. Szubin, Acting Under Secretary of Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence," *United States Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, And Urban Affairs*, August 5, 2015, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0144.aspx>

<sup>80</sup> Laurence Norman and Jay Solomon, "Iran, U.S. Seek Deal to Send Enriched Uranium to Kazakhstan," *Wall Street Journal*, December 8, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-seeks-arrangement-to-send-enriched-uranium-to-kazakhstan-1449612712>

<sup>81</sup> Reid Standish, "Meet the Central Asian Nation Trying to Benefit From the Iran Nuclear Deal," *Foreign Policy*, April 1, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/01/meet-the-central-asian-nation-trying-to-benefit-from-the-iran-nuclear-deal-kazakhstan-russia/>

hailed the agreement as a significant step forward for the nonproliferation movement and for all future efforts to resolve disputes by diplomacy: “Such cooperation,” he declared, “could be the prologue of a new paradigm of relations on the global level characterized by trust and a desire to seek successful solutions for complex problems peacefully.”<sup>82</sup> Speaking in 2018 at a meeting of the UN Security Council, Nazarbayev implored signatories of the JCPOA to overcome their differences and bring “political trust and a systemic dialogue” back to international affairs. Underscoring Kazakhstan’s status as a champion of nuclear nonproliferation, he also proposed Kazakhstan to be the host for any denuclearization talks held with North Korea.<sup>83</sup>

### **The Russia-Ukraine Conflict**

The outbreak of war in Eastern Ukraine and the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 posed one of the most serious challenges for Kazakhstan’s foreign policy since independence. On the one hand, Kazakhstan participated in various Russian-led bodies; Moscow looked to Astana to support its position within them and exerted pressure to that end. On the other hand, the worsening of Russian-Western relations that resulted from the conflict in Ukraine had immediate implications for Kazakhstan’s economy, given its close economic linkages with Russia. More importantly, the creation of the concept of “Novorossiya,” which Russian leaders embarked on in a fit of ethnonationalism, was greeted with greater alarm in Kazakhstan than any other country. After Ukraine, no other post-Soviet country had more ethnic Russians among its citizenry than Kazakhstan.

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<sup>82</sup> Malika Orazgaliyeva, “Kazakhstan Supports, Participates in Implementing Iran Nuclear Deal,” *The Astana Times*, December 31, 2015, <https://astanatimes.com/2015/12/kazakhstan-supports-participates-in-implementing-iran-nuclear-deal/>

<sup>83</sup> Elya Altynsarina, “Nazarbayev at UN Security Council: Binding System to Safeguard Denuclearisation Needed,” *The Astana Times*, January 19, 2018, <https://astanatimes.com/2018/01/nazarbayev-at-un-security-council-binding-system-to-safeguard-denuclearisation-needed/>

Could not Kazakhstan itself become a potential target for Russian ethnonationalists? It was therefore urgently important for Astana to work to contain and resolve the crisis. President Nazarbayev's own past, which included studies at a technical school in the Ukrainian city of Dniprodzerzhynsk through 1959-60, further deepened his understanding of, and sympathies with, all sides of the conflict.

Ukraine provides an important connection for Kazakhstan to European markets.<sup>84</sup> And fully 40 percent of Kazakhstan's trade is with members of the European Union. Kazakhstan's worries that Western sanctions could negatively affect its own economy were well-founded, for they would reverberate first of all through the Eurasian Economic Union, of which Kazakhstan had been a founding member. The devaluation of the ruble due to Western sanctions led to significant disagreements on trade between Russia and Kazakhstan, as Russian products made cheaper by the devaluation flooded the Kazakh market while Russia was slow in lifting trade restrictions for Kazakh imports.<sup>85</sup>

These factors made it important that Kazakhstan not take sides in the ensuing East-West conflict. Moreover, Kazakhstan's leaders themselves had mixed feelings about events in Ukraine. Most Kazakhstani strongly disapproved of revolutionary changes of government, and viewed the "Euromaidan" that unseated Viktor Yanukovich in 2013 in that context. Furthermore, Kazakh leaders had not forgotten the context in which the Soviet leadership transferred Crimea from the Russian Soviet Republic to the Ukrainian Soviet republic in 1954. Soon thereafter, it transferred several areas of Southern Kazakhstan to the Uzbek Soviet Republic and parts of western Kazakhstan to the Turkmen Republic. It also proposed to transfer

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<sup>84</sup> Weitz, "Kazakhstan Responds to Ukraine Crisis," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 24, 2014.

<sup>85</sup> "Trade War Mounts between Kazakhstan and Russia," *The Moscow Times*, April 13, 2015; Luke Rodeheffer, "Is a Trade War Brewing between Russia and Kazakhstan?" *Global Risk Insights*, June 20, 2015.



several northwestern areas to the Russian Republic, all in the name of “economic efficiency”. These moves led to a powerful protest by Kazakhstan’s Soviet leader, Dinmukhamed Kunaev, which led to his removal in 1962. He was reinstated following Brezhnev’s arrival at the helm of Soviet power in 1964, but memories of the Soviet government’s arbitrary changes of borders linger to this day, and affected Kazakh views of the Crimea crisis.<sup>86</sup>

It is also apparent that Nazarbayev himself felt that successive Ukrainian leaders had brought the crisis unto themselves, through their failure to strike a productive balance between their relations with Russia and with the West. Kazakhstan initially issued a statement that expressed “understanding” for Russia’s decision to seize Crimea, and termed the Crimean referendum as an “expression of free will.” Also, Kazakh leaders chose not to use the term “annexation” for Russia’s actions in Crimea.<sup>87</sup> All this keenly disappointed both Ukraine and Kazakhstan’s Western partners. However, Astana’s statements and actions in relation to the new authorities in Ukraine were equally disappointing to Moscow. Kazakhstan was the only Central Asian country to congratulate the new Ukrainian government following the ousting of Yanukovich.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, President Nazarbayev, like President Aleksandr Lukashenko of Belarus, flew to Kyiv to meet with

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<sup>86</sup> Bhavna Dave, *Kazakhstan – Ethnicity, Language and Power*, New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 85; interview with Bolat Nurgaliev, Deputy Chairman of the Board of the Foreign Policy Research Institute under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and former Secretary General of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2007-2009, November 2020.

<sup>87</sup> Richard Weitz, “Kazakhstan Responds to Ukraine Crisis,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 24, 2014; “‘We Don’t Call It Annexation,’ Kazakh Leader Says of Crimea,” *Moscow Times*, December 4, 2019.

<sup>88</sup> Emilbek Dzhuraev, “Central Asian Stances on the Ukraine Crisis: Treading a Fine Line?” *Connections*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2015, pp. 1-10. [www.jstor.org/stable/26326414](http://www.jstor.org/stable/26326414).

President Poroshenko to reaffirm his commitment to continued cooperation with their countries.<sup>89</sup>

Kazakhstan's role was particularly significant in the very beginning of the crisis, when numerous European leaders reached out to Nazarbayev and pleaded for him to urge President Putin to agree to a dialogue on the matter. It was therefore natural that Kazakhstan played a role in the informal talks that led to the Minsk agreements and to the emergence of the "Normandy Four" format of negotiations. Moreover, President Nazarbayev played a crucial role in the diplomatic effort that led to a meeting between the leaders of Ukraine, the Eurasian Customs Union (Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus) and the European Union in August 2014. Minsk became the geographic locus for this and future meetings; but it would be no exaggeration to say that Kazakhstan played a more central role behind the scenes in the diplomacy that made possible the "Minsk Process."

Belarus was the only country more directly affected by the Russia-Ukraine conflict than Kazakhstan. But unlike Kazakhstan, Belarus's relationships with both the West and Russia were problematic. Western relations with Belarus have long been marred by Belarus's internal politics and human rights situation, which Western countries criticized severely. But Belarus's relations with Russia had also been vexed, in spite of the existence of a so-called "Union State" between the two countries.<sup>90</sup> The fact that relations between Putin and Lukashenka were notably frosty provided an opportunity for Nazarbayev, who had maintained cordial relations with both Western leaders and President Putin, to step in.

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<sup>89</sup> Dzhuraev, "Central Asian Stances on the Ukraine Crisis: Treading a Fine Line?"

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, Alla Leukavets, "Belarus–Russia Relations in 2017: Behind the Curtain of the Long-lasting Drama" *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 206, September 12, 2017.

<https://www.research->

[collection.ethz.ch/bitstream/handle/20.500.11850/200132/3/RAD206%20%28002%29.pdf](https://www.research-collection.ethz.ch/bitstream/handle/20.500.11850/200132/3/RAD206%20%28002%29.pdf)

Nazarbayev played a major role in ensuring that the August 26 summit in Minsk took place, which in turn enabled presidents Poroshenko and Putin to meet officially for the first time.

In subsequent months, President Nazarbayev continued his efforts to promote a peaceful solution and in particular, to contain the worsening relations between Russia and Western powers. He focused especially on the roles of France and Germany. On December 14, President Nazarbayev welcomed French president Francois Hollande in Astana, during which he also orchestrated an improvised Hollande visit to Moscow on his return trip to France. Hollande's meeting with Putin restored some form of Russia-EU dialogue, which had been suspended since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis.<sup>91</sup>

Only a week later, Nazarbayev traveled first to Kyiv and then to Moscow, seeking to help bring about a platform for dialogue. In Kyiv he urged the Ukrainian leadership to reconsider the law on special status of the Donbass; to lift the economic embargo and resume economic ties with the areas under occupation. In Moscow, he emphasized the territorial integrity of Ukraine, the issue of Ukrainian control over its Russian border, and the importance of local elections in the occupied territories being held in accordance with Ukrainian law. As a result of these efforts, Poroshenko and Putin agreed to a meeting in the Normandy format, which was initiated in June 2014 when leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine met on the sidelines of the commemoration of the allied landing in Normandy in 1944. Nazarbayev offered to host a summit of participants in this format in January 2015, though German Chancellor Angel Merkel felt the need for more concrete action by Russia action prior to any such a summit.

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<sup>91</sup> Nurlan Onzhanov, "Peacemaker; Notes of a Diplomat", London: *Stacey Publishing*, 2015, p.130.

In early January 2015 Nazarbayev flew to Berlin to cement German support for the summit, and on January 12, a foreign ministerial meeting in the quartet format took place in Berlin. This was followed by intense diplomacy among the parties, including a January 21 phone conversation between Nazarbayev and President Obama. Finally, a summit was held on February 11, again in Minsk. This was necessary in order to assure that the tripartite contact group on Ukraine would also participate in the summit, something that was most feasible if the meeting occurred in the proximity of the conflict itself. These considerations made Minsk a more suitable location. It should be noted that in January, President Nazarbayev had indicated to Chancellor Merkel that the main issue was for the meeting to take place, and that its location was secondary. As was the case with the Iranian nuclear talks, Nazarbayev did not make the location of talks a goal in itself. He thereby demonstrated that Kazakhstani diplomacy was motivated by results rather than national self-aggrandizement.

Despite several Normandy Format negotiations and the adoption of the Minsk II agreements, the conflict in eastern Ukraine continues. President Nazarbayev has continued to offer a platform for negotiations between Ukraine and Russia. On November 12, 2019, in his capacity as chairman of the National Security Council of Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev offered to host a Russia-Ukraine meeting in Kazakhstan. President Vladimir Zelensky of Ukraine expressed support for this proposal, but the Russian President's spokesman remained non-committal.<sup>92</sup>

The negotiations that Nazarbayev proposed have yet to take place, and the rise of the Covid-19 pandemic has delayed any hope of them materializing in the foreseeable future. The Normandy Format continues to meet, as a result of which a cease-fire held for an extended period of time in the

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<sup>92</sup> Vladimir Isachenkov, "Kazakhstan Offers to Host Russia-Ukraine Meeting," *Associated Press*, November 12, 2019. <https://apnews.com/84b1b63f23c145128e08ac067ed7308a>.

autumn of 2020. It remains to be seen if this cease-fire will lead to a situation where the larger talks suggested by Nazarbayev can materialize.

Although Kazakhstan-led negotiations have not taken place, it is clear that President Nazarbayev played an important role in managing the Russia-Ukraine conflict and in ensuring the continuation of the Normandy process. His intervention also played an important role for Kazakhstan itself, by confirming once again the country's commitment to a multi-vector foreign policy.<sup>93</sup> Kazakhstan's ambition to serve as a mediator required it to maintain a neutral position between the two parties. Thus, it signaled that it did not fully support Russia's foreign policy and that it wishes to maintain a positive relationship with both the European Union and Ukraine. Kazakhstan made clear that it is not merely an extension of Russia, and that it considers itself free to pursue its own foreign policy. This called for a certain ambivalence on Nazarbayev's part. He never directly named the party responsible for the war in eastern Ukraine, and abstained from the United Nations General Assembly vote on the Crimean referendum.<sup>94</sup> This adroit position allowed Kazakhstan to deflect Russian pressure for greater levels of Kazakh support for its policies.<sup>95</sup>

### **The Islamic Reconciliation Initiative**

On April 13, 2016, Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan and Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey adopted the Joint Declaration on Islamic Reconciliation.

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<sup>93</sup> Aleksey Malashenko, "Nazarbayev as Mediator." *Carnegie Moscow Center*, January 21, 2015. <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/57771>.

<sup>94</sup> Emilbek Dzhuraev, "Central Asian Stances on the Ukraine Crisis: Treading a Fine Line?"

<sup>95</sup> Sean Roberts, "The Ukraine Conflict and the Future of Kazakhstan's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy," *Ponars Eurasia - Policy Memos*, September 2015.

<https://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/ukraine-conflict-and-future-kazakhstans-multi-vector-foreign-policy>.

The document was adopted through negotiations held in Istanbul.<sup>96</sup> The two leaders called on “Member States of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to develop a new paradigm of relations in the Islamic world by demonstrating good will and constructive approach in the matters of international relations and the settlement of conflicts and disputes.”<sup>97</sup>

The preamble of the document addresses the historical and political ties of Kazakhstan and Turkey, their joint commitment to the principles of the Charter of the UN, and their joint cooperation on international issues. Following the preamble, it listed eight articles dedicated to maintaining peace in the region, including adherence to the principles of the UN Charter and to ties existing through the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. The final eighth point is a concrete call to action:

“We call upon the Member States of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to contribute to the practical implementation of the initiative of Islamic rapprochement by carrying out concrete steps to deescalate the tensions in international relations and resolve the accumulated problems through the creation of various consultation mechanisms, using the potential of diplomatic missions, inter-parliamentary dialogues, non-governmental organizations and developing confidence-building measures.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> “Nazarbayev, Erdoğan Adopt Joint Declaration on Islamic Reconciliation.” *Inform.Kz*, April 13, 2016. [https://www.inform.kz/en/nazarbayev-erdo-an-adopt-joint-declaration-on-islamic-reconciliation\\_a2892469](https://www.inform.kz/en/nazarbayev-erdo-an-adopt-joint-declaration-on-islamic-reconciliation_a2892469)

<sup>97</sup> “Nazarbayev and Erdogan Adopted a Joint Declaration on Islamic Reconciliation” *Kazhstanskaya Pravda*, April 13, 2016. <https://kazpravda.kz/en/news/president/nazarbayev-and-erdogan-adopted-a-joint-declaration-on-islamic-reconciliation>

<sup>98</sup> “President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev and President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan Adopted the Joint Declaration on Islamic Reconciliation” *Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan*. April 13, 2016.

This initiative of rapprochement was mainly symbolic in nature, and has yet to lead to concrete results. However, it has had several positive consequences. On April 22-24, 2016, Almaty hosted an international seminar on the “Islamic Rapprochement Initiative.” The Secretary General of the Turkic Council, Kazakhstan diplomat Baghdad Amreyev, stated that “the Islamic Rapprochement Initiative was the only mechanism that specifically addresses inter-Islamic divisions as the main root cause of the conflicts in the Islamic world.”<sup>99</sup> However, he added that “it has not yielded the expected outcome due to the failure of OIC Member States at the time to address the root causes that had led to introduction of this Initiative.”<sup>100</sup>

Following the adoption of the Islamic Reconciliation Document, a Council of Wise Persons<sup>101</sup> was created at the OIC. This team is “composed of eminent persons having wide recognition in the Muslim World as leaders, who are respected for their wisdom, experience, knowledge, impartiality, and ability to provide guidance to address these issues.”<sup>102</sup>

## **The 2016 Turkish-Russian Reconciliation**

The Russian-Turkish dispute intensified on November 24, 2015, following the downing of a Russian jet by Turkish forces. Turkey claimed that the Russian jet had entered Turkish airspace and had refused to change course despite numerous warnings. Russia maintained that the jet was in Syrian

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<sup>99</sup> “Secretary General of the Turkic Council, Baghdad Amreyev Participated in the International Seminar on Islamic Rapprochement Initiative” *Turkic Council*, May 15, 2019. [https://www.turkkon.org/en/haberler/secretary-general-of-the-turkic-council-baghdad-amreyev-participated-in-the-international-seminar-on-islamic-rapprochement-initiative\\_1817](https://www.turkkon.org/en/haberler/secretary-general-of-the-turkic-council-baghdad-amreyev-participated-in-the-international-seminar-on-islamic-rapprochement-initiative_1817).

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> “Statement by H.E. Iyad Ameen Madani, Secretary General of the OIC,” *World Humanitarian Summit Istanbul*, May 23, 2016. [https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/sites/default/files/resources/2017/Jul/Statement\\_by\\_the\\_Organization\\_of\\_Islamic\\_Cooperation\\_Announcement\\_Plenary.pdf](https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/sites/default/files/resources/2017/Jul/Statement_by_the_Organization_of_Islamic_Cooperation_Announcement_Plenary.pdf)

<sup>102</sup> “Secretary General of the Turkic Council, Baghdad Amreyev Participated in the International Seminar on Islamic Rapprochement Initiative.”

airspace and had received no warnings.<sup>103</sup> In response, Russia imposed economic sanctions, suspended its visa-free regime with Turkey, and banned charter flights to that country, thus severely damaging Turkey's tourist industry.<sup>104</sup>

Six days after the Russian plane was shot down, President Nazarbayev responded to the dispute. In his annual State of the Nation address, Nazarbayev urged Russia and Turkey to "find common ground and not ruin the relations that have been built over many years."<sup>105</sup> One day earlier, on November 29, 2016, Nazarbayev had spoken on the phone with President Erdogan, and Erdogan had stated his wish to meet President Putin.<sup>106</sup> This phone call was initiated by Erdogan, after Putin had refused to speak with him.

Initially, the negotiations made little headway. But in late June presidents Nazarbayev and Putin met on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Tashkent, after which Nazarbayev suggested to Erdogan that if Ankara were to send a letter to Moscow, Putin would accept it.<sup>107</sup>

The letter was drafted with the aid of diplomats at Kazakhstan's Embassy in Ankara.<sup>108</sup> The wording the letter was important, as Turkey wanted to

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<sup>103</sup> "Turkey's Downing of Russian Warplane - What We Know." *BBC News*, December 1, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34912581>

<sup>104</sup> "Turkey's Downing of Russian Warplane - What We Know."

<sup>105</sup> Arkady Dubnov, "Caught in the Middle: Central Asia and the Russia-Turkey Crisis." *Carnegie Moscow Center*, December 16, 2015. <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/62290>.

<sup>106</sup> Michelle Witte, "Kazakh President Urges Russia and Turkey to Move Toward Reconciliation." *The Astana Times*, November 30, 2015. <https://astanatimes.com/2015/11/kazakh-president-urges-russia-and-turkey-to-move-toward-reconciliation/>

<sup>107</sup> Kulpash Konyrova, "Kazakhstan Plays Key Role in Russian, Turkish Reconciliation." *www.efe.com*, August 9, 2016. <https://www.efe.com/efe/english/world/kazakhstan-plays-key-role-in-russian-turkish-reconciliation/50000262-3008458>

<sup>108</sup> Murat Yetkin, "Story of Secret Diplomacy That Ended Russia-Turkey Jet Crisis." *Hürriyet Daily News*, August 6, 2016. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/murat-yetkin/story-of-secret-diplomacy-that-ended-russia-turkey-jet-crisis-102629>



express its condolences strategically, expressing regret on one hand, while refusing to issue a formal apology. The letter featured the following line: “I want to once again express my sympathy and deep condolences to the family of the Russian pilot and to say ‘excuse us’.”<sup>109</sup>

The letter goes on to state “Recep Tayyip Erdogan expresses his deep regret over what happened and stresses his readiness to do everything possible to restore the traditionally friendly relations between Turkey and Russia, as well as to jointly respond to crisis events in the region and fight terrorism.”<sup>110</sup> Days later, a meeting of presidential envoys took place, marking the first high profile meeting between Ankara and Moscow since the crisis began.<sup>111</sup> Shortly afterwards, on August 9, 2016, Erdogan and Putin met in St. Petersburg to negotiate the dispute.<sup>112</sup>

Mr. Nazarbayev was able to play a key role in bringing about the negotiations thanks to Kazakhstan’s unique relationship with both Turkey and Russia. He proved able to speak with both leaders and set out a path to negotiations at a time when neither of the two leaders was willing to communicate directly with the other. The August 9 meeting between Erdogan and Putin largely reconciled Turkish-Russian relations, at least for the time being.

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<sup>109</sup> “Я хочу ещё раз выразить своё сочувствие и глубокие соболезнования семье погибшего российского пилота и говорю: извините.” “Владимиром Путиным Получено Послание Президента Турции Реджепа Тайипа Эрдогана.” *Kremlin.ru*, June 27, 2016.

<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52282>; Andrey Kuznetsov, Mikhail Rubin, Vladislav Gordeev, “Кремль Уточнил Цитату Из Письма Эрдогана Путину.” *Rbc.ru*, June 28, 2016. <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/28/06/2016/577293d19a79475a60d1f53b>.

<sup>110</sup> “Владимиром Путиным Получено Послание Президента Турции Реджепа Тайипа Эрдогана.”

<sup>111</sup> Konyrova, “Kazakhstan Plays Key Role in Russian, Turkish Reconciliation.”

<sup>112</sup> Shaun Walker and Jennifer Rankin, “Erdogan and Putin Discuss Closer Ties in First Meeting since Jet Downing,” *the Guardian*, August 9, 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/09/erdogan-meets-putin-leaders-seek-mend-ties-jet-downing-russia-turkey>

Putin promised the “gradual easing of sanctions, the resumption of charter flights, and possibly the lifting of visas imposed for Turkish citizens after the incident.”<sup>113</sup>

### **The Astana Talks on the Syrian Civil War**

The Astana talks began as a joint effort by Russia, Turkey, and Iran (the guarantor states) to mediate the dispute between the government of Bashar al-Assad and Syrian rebel groups. The three powers had backed opposing sides in the Syrian Civil War, with Russia and Iran backing their longtime ally Assad, and Turkey supporting rebel groups near its border with Syria. Russia and Turkey were already among the participants in the UN-backed Geneva talks, which had been ongoing since 2012. When these talks failed, however, Putin and Erdogan agreed to attempt to resolve the crisis on their own. Putin and Erdogan first agreed open a parallel process to the Geneva talks in December 2016. To this end, on December 17, 2016, they called President Nursultan Nazarbayev to accept his offer to host talks.<sup>114</sup> Following a meeting in Moscow on December 20, 2016, the foreign ministers of Russia, Turkey, and Iran released a joint statement affirming each country’s support for a nonviolent resolution of the conflict. All three countries affirmed their belief that the conflict in Syria could not be resolved militarily and acknowledged the role of the UN and its calls for a ceasefire and political settlement in Syria.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Walker and Rankin, “Erdogan and Putin Discuss Closer Ties in First Meeting since Jet Downing.”

<sup>114</sup> “Telephone Conversations with President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin and President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan,” *Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, December 17, 2016.

[http://www.akorda.kz/en/events/international\\_community/phone\\_calls/telephone-conversations-with-president-of-the-russian-federation-vladimir-putin-and-president-of-turkey-recep-tayyip-erdogan](http://www.akorda.kz/en/events/international_community/phone_calls/telephone-conversations-with-president-of-the-russian-federation-vladimir-putin-and-president-of-turkey-recep-tayyip-erdogan)

<sup>115</sup> “Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey on Agreed Steps to Revitalize the Political Process to End the Syrian Conflict, Moscow, 20 December 2016,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian*

Prior to the first round of talks in January 2017, the Russian and Turkish governments announced that they had brokered a ceasefire between the Assad regime and a collection of rebel groups, which was set to go into effect at midnight on December 30. While thirteen rebel groups under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) were included in the agreement, the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the al-Nusra Front (Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate), were excluded. Because Turkey views the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) as a terrorist organization, it was likewise barred from the ceasefire agreement.<sup>116</sup> This ignored the reality that the Kurdish fighters in Syria played a key role, with U.S. and European backing, in the struggle against ISIS; but Turkey made it clear that it would not tolerate their inclusion in the talks.

With the first round of the Astana talks beginning on January 23, 2017, the parties involved roughly mirrored the signatories of the December 2016 ceasefire agreement. In addition to Russia, Turkey, and Iran, both the Assad regime and the various rebel groups dispatched representatives to Astana. Though previous efforts had been made to bring the Syrian government and opposition together at the negotiating table, this was not possible until the January meeting. Because the talks occurring just days after Donald Trump's inauguration as President of the United States, Washington did not send an official delegation, but the U.S. Ambassador to Kazakhstan attended as an observer. Additionally, the UN dispatched a representative to the conference. While the Astana talks were not organized by the UN, the world body expressed support for the Astana talks, believing that any

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*Federation*, December 20, 2016, [https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2573489?p\\_p\\_id=101\\_INSTANCE\\_ckNonkJE02Bw&\\_101\\_INSTANCE\\_ckNonkJE02Bw\\_languageId=en\\_GB](https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2573489?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_ckNonkJE02Bw&_101_INSTANCE_ckNonkJE02Bw_languageId=en_GB)

<sup>116</sup> "Syria Conflict: Ceasefire Agreed, Backed by Russia and Turkey," *BBC News*, December 29, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38460127>

progress made at Astana would help reinvigorate the ongoing UN-backed Geneva talks.<sup>117</sup>

The stated purpose of the Astana talks was to resolve peacefully the Syrian civil war and move towards a political settlement. The guarantors took care to draw parallels from their own efforts to the UN mandates and guidelines issued in accordance with the Geneva Process. Nevertheless, while the guarantors' statements suggested synergy with the UN's efforts, the outcomes of the Astana talks instead gave birth to suspicion that the guarantors sought to use the process to bypass the UN and create their own peace in Syria. Indeed, this was the argument made by the Syrian opposition when it elected to boycott the Congress on Syrian Reconciliation.<sup>118</sup> Whether or not this assessment was correct, the unilateral nature of the talks—even with Western advisors and a UN envoy present—permitted the guarantors to promote measures they felt were warranted, regardless of the UN's preferences.

Despite the ongoing Geneva Process, the United Nations voiced its support for the Astana talks. The UN's support resulted from a belief that any progress made at Astana would add to the likelihood that the Geneva Process would succeed. Commenting on the first round of the Astana talks in January 2017, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres declared that the UN's "presence in Astana was an absolute must in order to guarantee that after Astana, we could have Geneva. And in Geneva, we could discuss the key political aspects that are essential."<sup>119</sup> The UN's decision to send an envoy to the January 2018 "Congress on Syrian Reconciliation" in Sochi was

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<sup>117</sup> "Syria: UN, Security Council Welcome Astana Talks and Look Forward to Intra-Syrian Negotiations," *UN News*, February 1, 2017, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/02/550632-syria-un-security-council-welcome-astana-talks-and-look-forward-intra-syrian>

<sup>118</sup> Francois Murphy, "Syrian Opposition Says Will Boycott Russia-Brokered Peace Talks in Sochi," *Reuters*, January 26, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-un/syrian-opposition-says-will-boycott-russia-brokered-peace-talks-in-sochi-idUSKBN1FG022>

<sup>119</sup> "Syria: UN, Security Council Welcome Astana Talks and Look Forward to Intra-Syrian Negotiations."

somewhat puzzling, therefore, especially after Syrian opposition boycotted the meeting, claiming it was an attempt to undermine the Geneva Process. Unlike the case of the Astana Talks, Moscow had nevertheless invited the Syrian Kurds to this Congress.<sup>120</sup> Nonetheless, the UN's continued support for the Astana talks should be viewed as an attempt to ensure that continual progress would be made towards the nonviolent resolution of the civil war, regardless of whether this resolution is reached in Astana or Geneva.

Kazakhstan's activity on this issue built on its role in bridging the Turkish-Russian relationship: the Syrian conflict threatened to increase tensions between major regional powers. Indeed, this is what eventually occurred beginning in 2018, when Turkey and Russia again found themselves at loggerheads in Syria's Idlib province. During the previous year Kazakhstan had begun its two-year term as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. This strengthened its hand as a mediator, as did the links with both Russia and Turkey, as well as Iran, that had arisen in the course of the Almaty nuclear talks. This left Kazakhstan ideally positioned to serve as a neutral platform for dialogue on Syria.

Given Kazakhstan's prior experience at hosting major international conferences, Astana was seen as an appropriate venue for the talks.

The early rounds of the Astana talks were focused on maintaining the December 2016 ceasefire agreement. The fact that the Syrian government and opposition groups for the first time sat together at the negotiating table assured that the initial session in January 2017, would at least build confidence among the participants. To sustain the ceasefire, the three guarantor states agreed to establish a tripartite mechanism to monitor the situation on the ground in Syria. Additionally, all parties expressed their

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<sup>120</sup> "Russia Invites Syrian Kurds to People's Congress: Kurdish Official," *Reuters*, October 31, 2017, <https://br.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds-idUSKBN1D016J>.

readiness and willingness to cooperate in combating both ISIS and al-Nusra.<sup>121</sup>

The second round of meetings, held from February 15-16, resulted in the formalization of the tripartite mechanism agreed to at the first round of talks, with Russia, Turkey, and Iran establishing the Joint Monitoring Group. Additionally, it was agreed that the group would report its observations to the UN. In a further confidence-building measure, the parties also began discussing a draft agreement on the exchange of prisoners.<sup>122</sup>

Disagreements over events on the ground in Syria severely undermined the third round of talks, held through March 14-15, 2017. Claiming that the Assad regime had violated the ceasefire, opposition groups refused to attend the meeting. Despite their absence, the guarantor states made progress on a number of relevant issues. In addition to reviewing the opposition's claims about the breach of the ceasefire, the guarantors discussed the creation of working groups to oversee the exchange of prisoners and to consider constitutional reforms. The parties also discussed the ongoing fight against ISIS and al-Nusra, as well as efforts to remove landmines from UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Syria.<sup>123</sup>

The fourth round of talks, held from May 3-4, 2017, resulted in the establishment of four de-escalation zones. Additionally, the guarantors agreed that within these zones all hostilities between the Assad regime and

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<sup>121</sup> Zhazira Dyussebekova, "Syrian Peace Talks in Astana End with Support for Ceasefire, Further Talks in Geneva," *The Astana Times*, January 25, 2017, <https://astanatimes.com/2017/01/syrian-peace-talks-in-astana-end-with-support-for-ceasefire-further-talks-in-geneva/>

<sup>122</sup> Aigerim Seisembayeva, "Second Round of Syrian Talks in Astana Adopt Mechanism to Monitor Ceasefire," *The Astana Times*, February 17, 2017, <https://astanatimes.com/2017/02/second-round-of-syrian-talks-in-astana-adopt-mechanism-to-monitor-ceasefire/>

<sup>123</sup> "Astana-3 Talks End without Deal to Consolidate Syria Cease-Fire," *www.efe.com*, March 15, 2017. <https://www.efe.com/efe/english/world/astana-3-talks-end-without-deal-to-consolidate-syria-cease-fire/50000262-3208415>

the various rebel groups should cease; that humanitarian and medical aid should be delivered; that basic infrastructure (including water and electricity supplies) must be rapidly rebuilt; and that conditions for “the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons should be established.”<sup>124</sup> Together, these were the most fundamental and far-reaching achievements of the initiative to date.

The success or failure of the de-escalation zones were to be the best measure of the success or failure of the Astana talks. Even though the conferees had proposed to establish these zones in May 2017, their agreement was not formalized until the meeting between September 14-15, 2017. Only then were the final zones specified, to wit: at Eastern Ghouta; Idlib; parts of Homs, Hims, and Aleppo provinces; and parts of Daraa, Suwayda, and Quneitra provinces.<sup>125</sup>

Once the de-escalation zones were set up, the chief focus of the talks shifted to the exchange of prisoner and to defining political means for resolving the remaining points of conflict. In an effort to spur political reconciliation, Russia’s President Putin proposed that the guarantor states host a “Congress on Syrian Reconciliation” in Sochi. This conference took place between January 29-30, 2018, but once more the Syrian opposition groups refused to attend, claiming that Putin’s initiative was an attempt to bypass and undermine the UN peace process. Despite the absence of the rebel coalition, the guarantor states agreed to establish a “Constitutional Committee” with the goal of working towards political reform and

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<sup>124</sup> “Memorandum on the Creation of De-Escalation Areas in the Syrian Arab Republic,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, May 6, 2017.

[https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2746041](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2746041)

<sup>125</sup> Dmitry Lee and Galiaskar Seitzhan, “Latest Astana Process Talks Establish De-Escalation Zones in War-Torn Syria,” *The Astana Times*, May 7, 2017, <https://astanatimes.com/2017/05/latest-astana-process-talks-establish-de-escalation-zones-in-war-torn-syria/>

eventually organizing elections.<sup>126</sup> How this was to function without the central involvement of key independent opposition groups was not specified or even discussed. In short, these discussions in the absence of some of the key indigenous participants. Again, with only the guarantor states in attendance at the next round of talks in Astana on March 16, 2018, the parties discussed violence in the Idlib and Eastern Ghouta de-escalation zones, the first sign of trouble since the creation of the zones.<sup>127</sup>

The Constitutional Committee was finally launched in September 2019, more than 20 months after it was initially proposed at the Sochi meeting in January 2018.<sup>128</sup> The early months of its existence were devoted to procedural matters, leaving little time for progress on the ground. Meanwhile, the de-escalation zones largely failed to quell the fighting. Widespread violence in the Idlib de-escalation zone made international headlines in late 2019 and early 2020. The United Nations estimated that in three months since the Syrian government launched its fresh offensive in December 2019, 465 civilians (among them 145 children) had been killed and 948,000 civilians displaced.<sup>129</sup> The guarantors have also expressed their concern over the increased activity of terrorist groups in Syria. Finally, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Turkey-Syria border exposed serious disagreements between Ankara and Moscow. These tensions were eased

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<sup>126</sup> Francois Murphy, "Syrian Opposition Says Will Boycott Russia-Brokered Peace Talks in Sochi," *Reuters*, January 26, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-un/syrian-opposition-says-will-boycott-russia-brokered-peace-talks-in-sochi-idUSKBN1FG022>

<sup>127</sup> "Iran, Russia and Turkey Hold Syria Talks in Astana," *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 16, 2018, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/iran-russia-and-turkey-hold-syria-talks-in-astana-128831>

<sup>128</sup> "Special Envoy Hails Formation of Constitutional Committee as 'Sign of Hope for Long-Suffering Syrians' in Briefing to Security Council," *UN News*, September 30, 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13967.doc.htm>.

<sup>129</sup> "Syria War: Alarm after 33 Turkish Soldiers Killed in Attack in Idlib," *BBC News*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51667717>



when Erdogan and Putin signed an agreement that called for Russia and Turkey to set up joint patrols along the Turkey-Syria border.<sup>130</sup>

A further round of negotiations was held at Astana between December 10-11, 2019. Following this meeting, the parties announced that the next round of talks would be held in March, 2020.<sup>131</sup> However, in January 2020, Erdogan expressed his conclusion that the Astana talks had “crumbled.”<sup>132</sup> Erdogan’s comments came on the heels of continued violence in Idlib and heightened tensions caused by the Turkish army’s cross-border operation in October 2019. Despite Erdogan’s negative evaluation, the leaders of the guarantor states discussed developments in Syria via teleconference on April 22, 2020, providing hope that another round of talks in Astana will be held once the impact of the coronavirus pandemic had subsided.<sup>133</sup>

What, then, did the Astana talks achieve? Clearly, they did not manage to end the Syrian civil war. But their very construction suggests that this was not their primary aim, even though the talks were definitely intended to help facilitate a political solution to the conflict. Rather, the first purpose of the Astana talks was to manage the trilateral relationship between Turkey, Iran, and Russia over Syria. Reflecting this priority was the decision to continue the talks even in the absence of one or more of the Syrian parties, including the Syrian Kurds. This underscores the fact that the main aim and the main achievement of the initiative was to regulate the relations among these three powers, and to prevent the escalation of proxy warfare between

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<sup>130</sup> Bethan McKernan and Julian Borger, “Turkey and Russia Agree on Deal over Buffer Zone in Northern Syria,” *The Guardian*, October 22, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/22/turkey-and-russia-agree-deal-over-buffer-zone-in-northern-syria>

<sup>131</sup> “Joint Statement by Iran, Russia and Turkey on the International Meeting on Syria in the Astana Format (Nur-Sultan, 10-11 December 2019),” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, December 11, 2019.

<sup>132</sup> “Erdogan Says Astana Peace Talks Are ‘Dead,’” *Enab Baladi*, February 2, 2020, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2020/02/erdogan-says-astana-peace-talks-are-dead/>

<sup>133</sup> “Astana Partners Discuss Syria’s Idlib in Teleconference,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, April 22, 2020.

them into a direct military confrontation that would pit significant Eurasian powers against one another. To be sure, the resulting cease-fires and de-escalation zones, however imperfectly they were introduced, had a significant and positive humanitarian impact. Arguably yet more important, the talks played a key role in preventing the conflict from escalating into a region-wide conflagration.

## **The Function and Future of Kazakhstani Mediation**

This paper has shown how a substantial body of Kazakhstani diplomacy, initiated and actively led by the country's First President, has helped to manage and control the level of conflict in Eurasia and the Middle East. Anyone familiar with the world of international mediation knows that this level of activity comes with a price. Even for well-established countries with sizable foreign services it would pose a logistical and organizational challenge. The cost would be even higher for a young country like Kazakhstan, which faces a welter of other challenges and whose foreign service remains in a formative stage.

Acknowledging this, how should one evaluate Kazakhstan's many projects of mediation and the rationale upon which they are based? Beyond this, is it likely that Kazakhstan will continue to play such a role, and in an effective manner?

### **Managing Geopolitical Competition and Asserting Sovereignty**

Why has Kazakhstan, and particularly its First President, invested so much effort in the mediation of international disputes? This question can be asked of any country that invests scarce resources in such endeavors. One possible answer is pure altruism: a way for a country to help others. Globally, a focus on international mediation is to some extent correlated with countries that have substantial budgets for international development assistance. It is therefore not surprising to see the countries with the highest GDP per capita spending on foreign aid, such as the Nordic countries, playing an outsized role in the mediation of international disputes.

By global standards Kazakhstan is far from playing a large role in foreign assistance. But unlike many other states in its region, Kazakhstan has begun to transition from the role of a recipient of foreign aid to that of a donor. On this basis, Kazakhstan in 2014, created KAZAID, a national agency for development cooperation. The agency's start was relatively modest, committing at first to spend 0.01 percent of GDP, a sum that reflects the reality that Kazakhstan continues to prioritize its domestic development. But it was a significant start, as no other regional country had made a similar transition. Significantly, Kazakhstan also declared its intention to focus its assistance on its immediate neighbors.<sup>134</sup>

Kazakhstan's strategy on aid reflects the same rationale behind its mediation activities. It views aid as a foreign policy tool that is useful for stabilizing the country's neighborhood, which in turn increases Kazakhstan's own security.

Similarly, the rationale behind Kazakhstan's mediation efforts can also be deduced from the geographical focus of its activities. Unlike some European mediators, its mediation has not been focused on faraway lands. Rather it has been concentrated on those regions that affect the stability of Eurasia, which in turn determines Kazakhstan's own stability. In 1991, the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict threatened to usher in a wave of destructive nationalism in the Soviet Union; Kazakhstan acted to mitigate it. In 2010, the Kyrgyz crisis occurred directly on Kazakhstan's doorstep. In 2013, the Iranian nuclear issue threatened a larger military conflagration in the northern tier of the Middle East, which would have threatened Kazakhstan's security and stability. The Ukraine conflict worsened Russian-Western relations. Because Kazakhstan relies on its economic ties with both, it sought to lower tensions between them. The deterioration of Turkish-Russian relations

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<sup>134</sup> Nafissa Insebayeva, "On becoming a development cooperation partner: Kazakhstan's foreign policy, identity, and international norms", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, vol. 11 no. 2, 2020, pp.158-173.

similarly affected two of Kazakhstan's most important partners, and the Syrian crisis in particular risked putting them at loggerheads, as well as involving Iran.

All these confrontations threatened to destabilize the geopolitics of Central Asia and of the Eurasian continent as a whole. Such deterioration would in turn undermine Kazakhstan's own security, for any confrontation of regional powers in Eurasia poses a threat to Kazakhstan. As a landlocked country with a small population and large territory, surrounded by major powers, Kazakhstan's economic development and strategic stability depends directly on harmony in the region as a whole. Simply put, it has been strongly in Kazakhstan's interest to work to mitigate such threats to stability.

Kazakhstan's foreign policy is based on a multi-vectored approach. Rather than rely on a single power for its security and development, Kazakhstan has sought to raise the level of its positive interactions with all major powers and to achieve balances among them. While closely linked with Russia, Kazakhstan has also sought to strengthen its sovereignty by building a strategic partnership with China, and with the United States as well as Europe. This core strategy has been further extrapolated by raising Kazakhstan's profile in multilateral institutions. This garnered international goodwill for the country and deepened its links with the top echelons of world politics. That, in turn, strengthened Kazakhstan's sovereignty by creating reasons for both foreign states and influential organizations to take a serious interest in Kazakhstan's security and development.

Against this background, it is evident that Kazakhstan's efforts to engage in international mediation strengthen its own sovereignty in at least two ways. First, it adds another layer of goodwill and recognition. It imparts to the country a unique and positive identity, and gives reason for external powers to be protective of its success and security. Secondly, it provides

neighboring powers—notably Russia and China—with a strong rationale for accepting Kazakhstan’s neutrality in their own disputes elsewhere. The natural tendency of great powers is to seek the support of smaller states in their neighborhood. Against this, its mediation activities enable Kazakhstan to make a strong case that it is more useful to everyone for it to remain a neutral power that does not take sides but can help resolve differences between other countries. Kazakhstan, in other words, becomes more useful and viable as a mediator than as a supporter. Thus, for example, while Russia would have liked Kazakhstan’s endorsement of its policy in Ukraine, Astana was able to prove that it could, uniquely, serve as a go-between that allowed Russia a way to manage its relations with Western powers. That, in turn, gave Russia an interest in Kazakhstan’s sovereignty and international credibility, rather than simply seeking to maximize its influence over the country.

This mediation strategy has pitfalls. Above all, its success requires that the level of conflict between external regional powers remains manageable; and that these powers are, at the end of the day, interested in keeping a door open for the resolution of their mutual disputes. Kazakhstan’s efforts would come to nothing if major regional powers were ever to descend into mortal conflict with each other. Kazakhstan sees its role as helping to prevent that from happening.

This also explains the scope of Kazakhstan’s mediation efforts. This review has made clear that Kazakhstan’s efforts in the Iranian nuclear dispute, the Ukraine conflict and the Syrian civil war were focused only in part on the substance of the dispute. It is not that Kazakhstan did not care about Iran’s nuclear weapons program, the situation in eastern Ukraine, or the plight of Syrian civilians. In fact, both the statements and the actions of Kazakh leaders demonstrate clearly that they did. However, they were realistic about the limited prospects of success in resolving these difficult issues.

Instead, Kazakhstan's efforts were focused primarily on managing the fallout of these conflicts on a geopolitical level. In other words, Kazakhstan sought to contain these conflicts, and prevent their escalation into one directly pitting great power against each other in a way that would jeopardize the broader stability of Kazakhstan's own region.

Judged in this light, it is indisputable that Kazakhstan's efforts have been largely successful. It has so far helped avoid a military confrontation over the Iranian nuclear issue. It has helped ensure that geopolitical competition over Syria did not spiral out of control. And it played a role in halting a dangerous escalation of Russian-Western tensions over Ukraine and Syria.

A critic might point out that none of these conflicts has reached a lasting resolution. The Iranian nuclear question remains unresolved; Turkey and Russia may have come to some agreement in Syria, but are at loggerheads in Libya and the South Caucasus; and Russian-Western relations have yet to improve in a meaningful way. But Kazakhstan never allowed itself the illusion that it could resolve these problems. Rather, its goal has always been simply to bring together the disputing parties and in the presence of other powers and of responsible international organizations. Kazakhstan's expertise is as a mediator and conciliator. As such it prods those involved most deeply in disputes to devise solutions which they themselves can live with. The very act of organizing and engaging in such mediations has helped reduce the negative impact of diverse confrontations on Kazakhstan itself.

### **Looking Ahead**

Will Kazakhstan continue to play a role in mediating the great power politics of the Eurasian landmass? For over a quarter century Kazakhstan's role in international mediation has been led personally by its First President. But Nursultan Nazarbayev began a retreat from the public stage when he

resigned from the presidency in 2019, even as he remained Chairman of the National Security Council. In the short term, this may have strengthened his abilities to focus on international mediation, as he no longer has to supervise the day-to-day work of the government. But in the longer term, there will be a time when President Nazarbayev is no longer directly involved in Kazakhstani diplomacy. The question is to what extent Kazakhstan, in the absence of Nazarbayev, will be able to continue to play the same international role?

It is clear that international diplomacy is based to a large degree on personal relations and particularly on trust. Because of his long service and his record, President Nazarbayev has amassed a level of trust on the international scene that would be nearly impossible for anyone to replicate. That said, there are numerous reasons for thinking that Kazakhstan will be able to continue to play an important role in international mediation.

The first has to do with Nazarbayev's successor, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. It is of great importance that Tokayev is himself a highly regarded figure on the international scene who, as we have seen, played a critical role in designing Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy. Himself a diplomat with a past as Minister of Foreign Affairs and Head of the United Nations offices in Geneva, Tokayev also has the benefit of speaking fluent English and Chinese, as well as Kazakh and Russian. While he has been President for less than two years, his strong record makes him one of the region's most senior statesmen, and there is no reason why foreign powers should not approach Tokayev for assistance in resolving international problems.

Beyond Kazakhstan's top leadership, a strong factor lies in the meritocratic approach that the country has adopted in forming its diplomatic service. In many other countries of Central Asia, the same individuals often remain in their position for many years, often longer than a decade. And when high-level officials are let go, they typically do not remain in government service



at all, implying a loss of institutional memory. Kazakhstan's approach has been different: it has managed to ensure that a larger number of individuals have served in senior diplomatic capacities, while also retaining their expertise following the completion of their term. For example, among Kazakhstan's former foreign ministers, with the exception of two that have retired, all six persons continue to be engaged in Kazakhstan's government, either in diplomatic postings or in senior governmental positions. The career of President Tokayev himself reflects this careful nurturing and preservation of talent. At lower levels of government, a growing cadre of mid-career and senior diplomats continue to be rotated through various government positions, thus broadening and deepening their competence. This is the same system that Romans once called a "*cursus honorum*."

Kazakhstan's government, in other words, has been able to develop a solid basis for its continued involvement in multilateral diplomacy and international mediation. To this should be added the country's efforts to create a semi-independent analytical capacity comprised of a number of respected think tanks and several highly regarded university centers. Taken together, this means that Kazakhstan's capability to take on international mediation tasks is growing rather than diminishing.

Given the trajectory of the region's geopolitics, there will likely be a continued need for Kazakhstan to play a mediating role. In fact, since Kazakhstan began its efforts in earnest a decade ago, the level of strategic competition over Central Asia and neighboring regions has only increased. The differences between Russia and Turkey, between the West and Russia, between the West and Iran, and between all the major powers over Afghanistan are only the most visible examples of this. Relations between Turkey and the West have also deteriorated. And while the ties between Russia and China appear outwardly strong, in reality they are more marked by competition than either side would publicly admit. Chinese-Western

relations are also worsening, though this has yet to affect Central Asia directly. Similarly, Turkish-Chinese relations may be strengthening in a superficial way, but the situation in Turkic Xinjiang constitutes a strong impediment to their consolidation and has the potential to deteriorate further with little warning. All in all, the need to mitigate the fallout of great power competition across the heart of Eurasia is likely to grow more urgent with each passing year.

## Authors' Bio

**Svante E. Cornell**, Ph.D., is Director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center, co-founder of the Institute for Security and Development Policy, as well as Senior Fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council. He is a Policy Advisor to JINSA's Gemunder Center for Strategy. He holds a Ph.D. degree in peace and conflict studies from Uppsala University, where he was formerly Associate Professor of Government. His most recent book, with S. Frederick Starr, is *Long Game on the Silk Road: US and EU Strategy for Central Asia and the Caucasus*, published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2018.

**S. Frederick Starr**, Ph.D., is the founding chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center, and a Distinguished Fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council. He is a former President of Oberlin College and Provost at Tulane University, and is a member of the Board of Trustees of Nazarbayev University in Nursultan and of ADA University in Baku. His research on the countries of Greater Central Asia, their history, development, internal dynamics, as well as on U.S. policy towards the region, has resulted in twenty-two books and 200 published articles. He is the author of *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Ara*, published by Princeton University Press in 2013.