

## Threat Perception in Central Asia in Response to Russia-Ukraine: Kazakhstan Will Not Be Next

by Zhulduz Baizakova and Roger McDermott<sup>1</sup>



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Kazakhstan is the only state in Central Asia bordering Russia. The border between the two countries is the longest in the world (about 7,590 km) and is still in the process of being demarcated.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, ethnic Russians make up about 21% of the Kazakh population, mostly living in the northern regions of the country close to the border.

Should these be seen as risk factors, indicative that Moscow might repeat in Central Asia what it has been doing in Ukraine? Many Western policy-makers and authoritative experts believe that this might be the case, and that Kazakhstan is indeed at risk of suffering from Russian aggression. However, Kazakhstan has actually shown over the years that it is fully able to protect its interests in complicated geopolitical scenarios involving its neighbours (and, especially, Russia).<sup>3</sup>

This paper examines the potential for Russia to repeat in Central Asia what it has done in Ukraine, and explores several possible impediments to such a course of action. Given Russia's security operations in North Caucasus, and its ongoing operations in Ukraine, it is far beyond the

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<sup>2</sup> *Delimitatsiya i demarkatsiya gosudarstvennoy granitsy*, Kazakhstan MFA, <http://mfa.kz/index.php/ru/vneshnyaya-politika/aktualnye-voprosy-vneshnej-politiki-kazakhstana/delimitatsiya-i-demarkatsiya-gosudarstvennoj-granitsy>.

<sup>3</sup> *Nervous Kazakhstan 'sensitive' about Ukraine question*, BBC News, November 9, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29843980>; P. Eltsov and K. Larres, *Putin's Targets: Will Eastern Ukraine and Northern Kazakhstan be Next?*, New Republic, March 10, 2014, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/116965/putins-next-targets-eastern-ukraine-and-northern-kazakhstan>; R. Lourie, *Kazakhstan May Be the Next Ukraine*, The Moscow Times, May 4, 2014, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/kazakhstan-may-be-the-next-ukraine/499376.html>; M. Birnbaum, *In Kazakhstan, fears of becoming the next Ukraine*, The Washington Post, May 2, 2015, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/in-kazakhstan-fears-of-becoming-the-next-ukraine/2015/05/01/10f7e73c-e878-11e4-8581-633c536add4b\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/in-kazakhstan-fears-of-becoming-the-next-ukraine/2015/05/01/10f7e73c-e878-11e4-8581-633c536add4b_story.html).



Russian state's capacity to open a "third front" elsewhere. This is especially the case in Central Asia, since Moscow has real security concerns shared by its partners in the region, concerning potential instability as a result of transnational or regionwide threats emanating from Afghanistan. In order to better understand the possible repercussions of the Ukraine crisis in Central Asia, this study traces the response of the Central Asian republics to the events in Ukraine, and examines the trends that emerge from this analysis in relation to Russian security perspectives on Central Asia. It also examines whether Kazakhstan, like Ukraine, might be exposed to Russian-inspired violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, taking into account that the two countries are allies in terms of foreign, defence and security policies. Economic policy, integration initiatives and the vexed and sensitive questions pertaining to ethnic relations in Kazakhstan are also examined.

## Central Asian Responses to the Ukraine Crisis

The various Central Asian republics' different responses to, and handling of, the aftermath of Russia's seizure of Crimea and the ongoing crisis in Ukraine highlight their distinct approaches to foreign and security policy. In the context of the crisis in Ukraine, the potential effects on some Central Asian states could be particularly heavy. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are all highly dependent upon remittances from migrant workers in Russia. Economic sanctions against Russia have led to a steady decrease in these remittances, which in 2013 accounted for 46.2% of GDP in Tajikistan, 13.9% in Uzbekistan and 29.5% in Kyrgyzstan. The crisis has already resulted in slow growth in all these countries, with Uzbek migrant workers' remittances falling to 17.5%.<sup>4</sup>

While the response to the crisis in Ukraine has been generally passive, with most Central Asian governments remaining ultimately non-committal on events in Crimea, each capital has shown its own distinct approach. The most striking difference in approach is between the official Kazakh and Uzbek positions, though there is no evidence that either sees its large Russian-speaking population as indicative of any potential threat to its sovereignty and national security from Russia.

Uzbekistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and parliament have issued cautious statements "eliciting deep concern" about the crisis, urging Russia and Ukraine to "rely on political mechanisms." However, as external observers have noted since the questionable 16 March 2014 referendum on Crimea, Tashkent has refrained from direct criticism of Russia's actions and has issued no statements on Southeastern Ukraine.

Currently Uzbekistan finds itself in the most difficult position, due to the impact on regional security of the ISAF drawdown from Afghanistan in 2014. Tashkent openly expects trouble to erupt in the aftermath of the ISAF exit. Uzbek foreign policy before the drawdown linked the country's assistance to ISAF, including availability of the Northern Distribution Network, to future military and technical aid from the West. The unfolding crisis in Ukraine then made any sort of US-Russia or NATO-Russia cooperation unsustainable, at least for the near future. Who could Tashkent turn to, if tensions along the Afghan-Uzbek border were to explode? It is important to look at the situation from an Uzbek perspective, since it is currently the only country in Central Asia to conduct a particularly active information campaign about Afghanistan's instability and unfriendliness. In a recent meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) defence ministers in Khujand, member states discussed the possibility of constructing "mini buffer territorial formations" along Tajikistan's and Uzbekistan's bor-

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<sup>4</sup> N. Mendkovich, *Rossiyskiy krizis i trudovyye migranty iz stran Tsentral'noy Azii*, Regnum, February 9, 2015, <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1893385.html>.



ders with Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> Tashkent is one of the driving forces behind this idea. President Islam Karimov requires security assistance as well as guarantees that, if the situation in Afghanistan deteriorates, either Russia or NATO will step in. Karimov has repeatedly demonstrated his manoeuvrability by skilfully switching sides, especially when his country's national security is at stake.

On 20 March 2014, the Kyrgyz Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued the clearest statement of support for Russia, recognizing the so-called Crimean referendum and equating the expression of the “will of the people” to its own experience of revolution in 2010. Bishkek's offer of unwavering support to Moscow reflects both its economic weakness and considerable Russian leverage within the country. With the US airbase at Manas now closed as part of the ISAF drawdown from Afghanistan, the only foreign power with basing rights in the small state is Russia. Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan were among the absentees during the 27 March 2014 UN General Assembly vote on the territorial integrity of Ukraine within “internationally recognized borders.” Uzbekistan abstained.<sup>6</sup>

Tajikistan and Turkmenistan issued no official statement regarding the crisis; their silence is revealing, tantamount to a declaration of neutrality allowing them to preserve relations with both Russia and Ukraine. Around 47 percent of Tajikistan's GDP comes from remittances earned in Russia, and Dushanbe has developed other financial and economic dependencies over the years.

For the duration of the crisis and in the coming years, Central Asia may present an undeclared battlespace for influence between Russia and the West. There is

no evidence that these countries consider Russia to be a threat, yet their complex and differing responses to the crisis reveal a spectrum of interests and pressures which has resulted in less than clear support for Russian policy. The various positions adopted by all the Central Asian countries are unlikely to change even if the crisis in Ukraine deepens, unless states like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan experience problems with energy and transportation routes because of Western sanctions, or as an indirect result of Russia's denying overland access to Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> For all the Central Asian states, geographic proximity to Russia and a close historical association with the Russian Federation (as the successor to the Soviet Union) are inescapable facts.

### **Kazakhstan's Position on the Ukraine Crisis: Keeping Everything in Limbo**

Kazakhstan's response to the crisis has consistently reflected a perception that there are no security implications for the state: the various factors which triggered the conflict between Moscow and Kyiv are absent in Kazakhstan. No Kazakh official or international relations expert considers Russia to have any potential claim on the territory of Kazakhstan. The crisis has, therefore, not been accompanied by more frequent meetings of Kazakhstan's Security Council, or by other signs of anxiety concerning a potential threat. The statement on the Ukraine crisis by the Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs offered support for the referendum in Crimea, but stopped short of fully supporting Russian policy; the abstention from the 27 March 2014 UN General Assembly vote was consistent with this non-committal stance. Following the Ukrainian

<sup>5</sup> J. Kucera, *Russia, Uzbekistan Floating Plans To Create 'Buffer State' In Afghanistan*, The Bug Pit, April 4, 2014, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68232>.

<sup>6</sup> *The UN General Assembly Vote on Crimea: Background and Analysis*, March 28, 2014, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2014/03/28/the-un-general-assembly-vote-on-crimea-background-and-analysis/>; D. Trilling, *Russia Threatened Post-Soviets at UN - Press Report*, Eurasianet, March 29, 2014, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68208>.

<sup>7</sup> A. Sarkorova, *Krizis na Ukraine: reaktsiya stran Tsentral'noy Azii*, Dushanbe, Russkaya sluzhba Bi - bi - si, August 6, 2014, [http://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2014/08/140806\\_ukraine\\_crisis\\_central\\_asia\\_reaction](http://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2014/08/140806_ukraine_crisis_central_asia_reaction); M. K. Bhadrakumar, *Ukraine's shadow on Central Asian steppes*, Indian Punchline Blog, March 9, 2014, <http://blogs.rediff.com/mkbbhadrakumar/2014/03/09/ukraines-shadow-on-central-asian-steppes>.



presidential inauguration on 7 June 2014, most Central Asian counterparts failed to offer their congratulations to Poroshenko. Kazakhstan sent Prime Minister Karim Masimov to the swearing-in ceremony, and was the only Central Asian country represented at such a high level. Experts argue that Kazakhstan's position towards the new Ukrainian leadership is the most balanced and constructive within the region.

Amidst international suspicion of Russia's behaviour in its relations with its neighbours following events in Ukraine in 2014, a curious (if misleading) controversy arose surrounding Vladimir Putin's response to a question about Kazakhstan during the 2014 Seliger National Youth Forum. Western commentators soon latched onto out-of-context segments of Putin's response, including: "The Kazakhs never had a state of their own." One particular commentary, blending the fears and concerns sparked in NATO countries by the Kremlin's assertive foreign policy and aggressive behaviour in Ukraine, stated that Putin was questioning Kazakhstan's statehood and described his words as "chilling." If such an interpretation was warranted, it is surprising that Astana failed to react. Why? Let us examine the question asked on that occasion, and the precise context of Putin's response. The question was as follows: "Should we expect developments in Kazakhstan to follow the Ukrainian scenario should Mr Nazarbayev leave his post? Has any strategy been designed to prevent this? We have some proposals; we would like to join this work, if possible. What are the prospects for Eurasian integration?"<sup>8</sup>

Putin's response actually began by clarifying the nature of bilateral relations: "Here is what I can say about Kazakhstan. It is our closest strategic ally and

partner." He praised Nazarbayev's leadership of the country, attributed the idea of the EEU to him, adding that his achievements were "in the interests of the Kazakh state." In the part of his response that sparked the controversy, Putin also said: "The Kazakhs never had a state of their own, and he created it." In several areas of his overall response, he repeatedly acknowledged Kazakhstan's modern-day statehood. In this context, the authors conclude that Astana avoided any response to these comments simply because it was viewed as a clumsy compliment: Putin was effectively responding to the question by saying Kazakhstan is not Ukraine.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, Kazakhstan fully and genuinely understands that the Eurasian continent has been caught up in the geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West because of the Ukraine crisis.<sup>10</sup> Kazakhstan's official position about the Ukraine crisis is open, clear, simple and based on fundamental international law: Ukraine has to remain a stable and independent country with absolute territorial integrity.<sup>11</sup>

In one of his interviews, President Nursultan Nazarbayev said that he saw the entire Ukraine crisis as stemming from the fact that, since independence, it has failed to develop relevant economic policies leading to sustainable growth for the country; as a result, it has suffered from weak welfare schemes, low standards of living, high unemployment and other factors.<sup>12</sup> Dismissing any supposed conflict of interest, the president calls himself "an objective manager, who takes no one's side and, being neutral, can contribute a constructive solution."<sup>13</sup>

Independent Kazakhstan has so far never recognized any disputed territories such as Crimea, Abkhazia,

<sup>8</sup> See: C. Michel, *Putin's Chilling Kazakhstan Comments*, The Diplomat, September 3, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46507>.

<sup>9</sup> See: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46507>.

<sup>10</sup> See: <http://www.nomad.su/?a=3-201502170024>.

<sup>11</sup> *Kazakhstan vozderzhalsya ot golosovaniya po rezolyutsii za territorial'nuyu tselostnost' Ukrainy*, TengriNews, March 28, 2014, [http://tengrinews.kz/world\\_news/kazakhstan-vozderzhalsya-golosovaniya-rezolyutsii-252624/](http://tengrinews.kz/world_news/kazakhstan-vozderzhalsya-golosovaniya-rezolyutsii-252624/).

<sup>12</sup> *Vstrecha s predstavitel'yami vedushchikh otechestvennykh telekanalov*, Akorda, [http://www.akorda.kz/ru/page/page\\_218761\\_vstrecha-s-predstavitel'yami-vedushchikh-otchestvennykh-telekanalov#page](http://www.akorda.kz/ru/page/page_218761_vstrecha-s-predstavitel'yami-vedushchikh-otchestvennykh-telekanalov#page).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*





South Ossetia, Kosovo or Taiwan.<sup>14</sup> There is little doubt that, should Ukraine indeed be further dismembered and new entities appear on the map, exactly the same policy will be applied.

A few Russian nationalists, including Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, have commented negatively on Kazakhstan and its politics in the context of the unraveling Ukraine crisis. However, the answer from Astana's officials was curt and the Russian Ministry for Foreign Affairs in any case spoke of the "solid and substantial legislation existing between Russia and Kazakhstan that serves as reliable defence for the bilateral relations against unhealthy claims and statements."<sup>15</sup> By doing so, Russian officials not only clarified that Russia has no territorial or any other claims regarding Kazakhstan, its soil and its citizens, but they also reaffirmed the solid strategic partnership and friendship between the two countries.

Since gaining its independence, Kazakhstan has remained open-minded in its foreign policy, looking both East and West and freely entering into partnerships for the purpose of constructive cooperation and for a "win-win" scenario of mutual benefits. Today, as Russia continues to suffer from increasing Western sanctions, both Kazakhstan and Belarus also need to seriously consider further economic integration with Russia; worse, in the context of the developing situation, sanctions might reverberate across the entire Eurasian economic space, seriously impacting Russia's economic and political partners.<sup>16</sup>

Most importantly, Astana understands the current situation and is always ready to discuss it with its regional and global partners, in the hope that the Ukraine crisis might soon be resolved. If not, Kazakhstan might explore other strategies so as to re-

main faithful to its multi-vector foreign policy – but most importantly, paraphrasing Lord Palmerston, to its national interests.

## The Russian Minority in Kazakhstan

Since the start of the Ukraine crisis, the issue of the Russian ethnic minority in Kazakhstan has become more prominent and sensitive, prompting thousands of posts on public forums, blogs and social networks. All the ethnic Russian communities felt directly involved. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, ethnic Russians found themselves in an alien country with no knowledge of the Kazakh language or its history and culture, as was the case of Russian minorities in other emerging post-Soviet countries. They had difficulties in identifying with their new home country, and in establishing their own identities. At the same time, they assumed that standards of living in Russia would be much higher and were concerned that an independent Kazakhstan might no longer treat them as they had been accustomed during the Soviet era; similar situations were developing in other Central Asian countries.<sup>17</sup>

While about 40% of the ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking minorities in Kazakhstan emigrated to Russia, this trend was far less marked in the unfriendly and increasingly hostile Baltic States (only about 3%). The explanation for this difference is to be found in social and economic factors, rather than ethnicity.<sup>18</sup> According to many analysts, the massive ethnic Russian emigration from Kazakhstan since independence has more to do with economic grievances such as high unemployment and poor social security provisions,

<sup>14</sup> *Kazakhstan otkazalsya priznat' nezavisimost' Abkhazii i Yuzhnoy Osetii*, Radio Azattyk, October 3, 2008, <http://rus.azattyq.org/content/article/1293423.html>.

<sup>15</sup> See: <http://bnews.kz/ru/news/post/211278/>.

<sup>16</sup> *Belorussiya i Kazakhstan otrvyayutsya ot Rossii*, December 23, 2014, <http://www.utro.ru/articles/2014/12/23/1227197.shtml>.

<sup>17</sup> *Russkiye v Kazakhstane: zalozhniki Russkogo Mira*, August 31, 2014, <http://argumentua.com/stati/russkie-v-kazakhstane-zalozhniki-russkogo-mira>.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*



rather than any kind of ethnic/national discrimination issues.<sup>19</sup> Another reason for the declining numbers of ethnic Russian minorities relates to demography: their birth rates are much lower and the death rates are much higher than in average Kazakh families.<sup>20</sup>

On 1 January 2014 there were 3,685,009 Russians (21.47%) in Kazakhstan.<sup>21</sup> Areas containing the largest Russian ethnic population include the Northern Kazakhstan (49.4%), Kostanai (42.12%) and Eastern Kazakhstan (37.9%) districts.<sup>22</sup> The constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan states that the Russian language “shall be officially used on equal grounds along with the Kazak language in state institutions and local self-administrative bodies.”<sup>23</sup>

Kazakhstan’s leadership has a full understanding of these sensitive language issues. Prohibiting all languages other than Kazakh would be a sure recipe for replicating what Ukraine experienced in the aftermath of the Maidan protests, and the government in Astana will simply not allow this: Nazarbayev is determined to avoid this mistake at all costs.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, he reminded the population that “we will strongly suppress any forms of national radicalism, regardless of which side it stems from.”<sup>25</sup>

Nazarbayev places equal emphasis on the Kazakh, Russian and English languages by arguing that every citizen of Kazakhstan should speak all three fluently with a view to ever-increasing globalisation.<sup>26</sup> In 2010, Kazakhstan’s Minister for Education Bakhytzhan Zhum-

agulov confirmed that 30% of the country’s schools were teaching solely through the medium of Russian (bearing in mind that, according to the 2009 census, ethnic Russians make up 23.7% of the population). In 2007, only two of the country’s 120 private schools were running classes solely in Kazakh.<sup>27</sup>

With Kazakhstan adopting no new legislation concerning its ethnic Russian minorities, the main question is whether this could conceivably provide a pretext for an invasion of the country. So far, unlike the other Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan has never experienced serious inter-ethnic conflict, which is a solid foundation to build upon.

The head of the Russian community in Kazakhstan since 1992, Yuri Bunakov, has said that after serious dialogue with the Kazakh authorities Moscow agreed to offer assistance, such as funding the construction of the Russian House, the community’s official headquarters. He also believes that ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan are treated better than in the Baltic States, for example, and that Russian nationalism is not deep-rooted in Kazakhstan.<sup>28</sup>

However, any serious political initiatives to increase the use and status of the Kazakh language face strong resistance from ethnic Russian communities, most of whom do not speak Kazakh and therefore see the promotion of Kazakh as relegating them to a marginal status. When told that they should study Kazakh, their response is predictable: there are no spe-

<sup>19</sup> *Russkiye v sovremennom Kazakhstane (Kbkh - Kbkhii V. Nachalo)*, Kazakh Ethnology, October 2, 2007, <http://kz.ethnology.ru/win/rus-now.html>.

<sup>20</sup> *Russkiye v Kazakhstane: zalozhniki Russkogo Mira*, Op. Cit.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> See: <http://www.akorda.kz/en/category/konstituciya>.

<sup>24</sup> [http://forbes.kz/process/nazarbaev\\_v\\_sluchae\\_peregibov\\_s\\_gosyazykom\\_nas\\_jdet\\_sudba\\_ukrainiyib](http://forbes.kz/process/nazarbaev_v_sluchae_peregibov_s_gosyazykom_nas_jdet_sudba_ukrainiyib).

<sup>25</sup> *Vystupleniye prezidenta kazakhstana N. Nazarbayeva na kbkhii sessii assamblei naroda kazakhstana*, Astana, Presidential website, [http://www.akorda.kz/ru/page/page\\_219853\\_vystupleniya-prezidenta-kazakhstana-n-nazarbaeva-na-kbkhii-sessii-assamblei-naroda-kazakhstana](http://www.akorda.kz/ru/page/page_219853_vystupleniya-prezidenta-kazakhstana-n-nazarbaeva-na-kbkhii-sessii-assamblei-naroda-kazakhstana).

<sup>26</sup> *Nazarbayev: V sluchaye peregibov s gosyazykom nas zhdot sud'ba Ukrainy*, Forbes, August 25, 2014, [http://forbes.kz/process/nazarbaev\\_v\\_sluchae\\_peregibov\\_s\\_gosyazykom\\_nas\\_jdet\\_sudba\\_ukrainyi](http://forbes.kz/process/nazarbaev_v_sluchae_peregibov_s_gosyazykom_nas_jdet_sudba_ukrainyi).

<sup>27</sup> *Itogi natsional'noy perepisi naseleniya 2009 goda*, November 12, 2014, <http://www.nomad.su/?a=3-201011150038>; *Russkiye v Kazakhstane: zalozhniki Russkogo Mira*, Op. Cit.

<sup>28</sup> *Yuriy Bunakov - politicheskii portret “Ne v sile Bog, a v pravde,”* Zona Kz, May 31, 2000, <https://zonakz.net/articles/13219?action=author&cid=3356>.



cific centres or courses, sometimes there is a lack of funding and, most importantly, relevant textbooks and dictionaries are not to be found. Nonetheless, returning to mother Russia is not an option: Moscow cannot offer them employment, pensions or accommodation in line with those they have in Kazakhstan.<sup>29</sup>

Among many other concerns, ethnic Russians perceive the expansion of the Kazakh language as discriminatory towards them, and some claim that they cannot find suitable employment. However, the same problem is experienced by many oralmans (Kazakh returnees from abroad) who cannot find an adequate job unless they speak Russian.<sup>30</sup>

With no legislative changes and with more than 85% of the national population speaking Russian, there are no immediate threats of a Maidan movement developing. Ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan have the same rights and privileges as any other ethnic/national minority; these rights and privileges are secured by the constitution and other relevant legislation, as well as by the wise foreign and domestic policy of Kazakhstan's leadership.

## Kazakhstan's Active 360° Foreign Policy Approach

Kazakhstan launched its new Foreign Policy Concept for 2014-2020 on 21 January 2014, one month before former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich went into exile.<sup>31</sup> This is important, because Kazakhstan had until that time been applying the Concept both regionally and globally. The document outlines the countries Kazakhstan prioritizes, in order of im-

portance. Similarly, Kazakhstan considers itself a responsible member of the United Nations, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and various other bodies or entities.

The Foreign Policy Concept clearly states that foreign policy will focus principally on comprehensive provision of national security and defence capabilities; sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country; strengthening of peace, and of regional and global security; provision of a sustainable and positive image of the country in the eyes of the international community; establishment of a just and democratic world order under the central aegis of the UN; further integration into regional and international trade and economic relations; and achievement of high living standards for the population.

In the light of the Concept, Kazakhstan perceives the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) as the tool to achieve wider Eurasian economic integration. Importantly, the EEU is seen as a purely economic alliance.

A number of Kazakhstan's foreign policy initiatives since the start of the Ukraine crisis have been little noticed by the wider international public and even by expert communities. Despite its seemingly closer integration with Russia, Astana still practices its multi-vector foreign policy. On June 22 2015 Kazakhstan had finally concluded the accession negotiations with World Trade Organization (WTO) and is about to become the 162<sup>nd</sup> member of the organization; up to date 90% of Kazakhstan's bilateral trade is with the WTO members.<sup>32</sup> This may potentially undermine the efficiency of the EEU across many areas. Additionally, Kazakhstan's recently introduced 15-day visa-free regime for the nationals of ten developed countries that are major sources of foreign direct investment has

<sup>29</sup> Yuriy Bunakov: *Ya ne pol'zuyus' kazakhskim yazykom*, Altyn Orda, October 4, 2011, <http://www.altyn-orda.kz/yurij-bunakov-ya-ne-polzuyus-kazaxskim-yazykom/>.

<sup>30</sup> N. Lakhauy, *Molodyye oralmany po priyezde na uchebu pervya uchat russkiy yazyk*, Radio Azattyk, November 29, 2013, <http://rus.azattyq.org/content/kazakhstan-repatriants-language-learning/25183913.html>.

<sup>31</sup> *O Kontseptsii vneshney politiki Respubliki Kazakhstan na 2014 - 2020 gody*, Akorda, January 21, 2014, [www.akorda.kz/upload/%20№741%20p.doc](http://www.akorda.kz/upload/%20№741%20p.doc).

<sup>32</sup> *Kazakhstan Reaches 'Historic' Agreement on WTO accession*, June 29, 2015, <http://www.kazembassy.org.uk/en/articles/article/38>.



been extended until 15 July 2016.<sup>33</sup>

On 9 October 2014, Kazakhstan reached a new Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU, to be signed in 2015; it covers a wide range of topics.<sup>34</sup> In October 2014, Kazakhstan also became the first Central Asian member of the “Asia-Europe” Meeting (ASEM), which gives 51 countries in East Asia and Europe<sup>35</sup> an informal platform for cooperation and dialogue across various sectors.<sup>36</sup>

The importance of the Protocol to the Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone Treaty, signed by the US, the UK, France, China and Russia in May 2014, was largely overlooked by the international media: the five major nuclear powers had effectively guaranteed that the Central Asian region will never face a serious threat of nuclear attack from any of them. This is particularly important in the context of the ongoing Ukraine crisis.<sup>37</sup>

One of the most labour-intensive tasks for Kazakhstan’s foreign policy has been its candidacy for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for 2017-2018. Nazarbayev’s visit in late May 2014 to China again attracted little Western media attention: he participated in the CICA Summit in Shanghai and signed various bilateral documents, including one on transboundary water issues. Kazakh ENRC and Kazakhmys received several billion dollars in investments; in addition, Kazakhstan and China created a

joint fund of up to \$1 billion. Kazakhstan has become the second largest economic partner of China, after Russia, among the CIS countries: the Heritage Foundation says China invested more than \$21 billion in Kazakhstan in 2005-2013.<sup>38</sup>

### *Eurasian Economic Union*

It is too early to make any serious forecasts about the future of the EEU, officially created on 1 January 2015. However, the Foreign Policy Concept acknowledges the existing Customs Union (CU) and the economic support Astana is willing to give to it, in accordance with existing arrangements. Importantly, nowhere in the Concept does Kazakhstan speak of either the CU or the EEU as concerned with anything other than economic matters and trade.<sup>39</sup>

On 24 August 2014, Nazarbayev reassured the population that the EEU presents certain advantages for the country, like making delivery of goods among EEU members cheaper and thus making items produced in Kazakhstan more competitive for world markets.<sup>40</sup> Astana will discontinue its membership if its independence is threatened by any attempt to make the EEU a political union; however, strengthening commercial relations with neighbouring countries contributes to stability.<sup>41</sup>

Nazarbayev has also confirmed that the US and EU

<sup>33</sup> *Bezvizovyye strany dlya Kazakhstana v 2015 godu*, Tengrinews, May 13, 2015, [http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/bezvizovyye-stranyi-dlya-kazakhstana-v-2015-godu-274627/](http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/bezvizovyye-stranyi-dlya-kazakhstana-v-2015-godu-274627/).

<sup>34</sup> *Diplomatiya Kazakhstana: za sotrudnichestvo s polozhitelnym rezul'tatom dlya vsekh*, Ministerstvo inostrannykh del RK, October 16, 2014, <http://mfa.kz/index.php/ru/blog-ministra-1/intervyu-i-vystupleniya-ministra/2101-diplomatiya-kazakhstana-za-sotrudnichestvo-s-polozhitelnym-rezultatom-dlya-vsekh>.

<sup>35</sup> A. Mannheimer, *Nursultan Nazarbayev arrived in Milan to take part in the Summit of the Forum 'Asia – Europe'*, Kashagan Today, October 17, 2014, <http://kashagan.today/?p=4916>.

<sup>36</sup> See: <http://www.aseminboard.org/about>.

<sup>37</sup> See: <http://www.nti.org/treaties-and-regimes/central-asia-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-canwz/>.

<sup>38</sup> *Nazarbayev podvel itogi vizita v Kitay*, Mcps-khorgos.kz, <http://www.mcps-khorgos.kz/smi-review/nazarbaev-podvel-itogi-vizita-v-kitai>.

<sup>39</sup> *Dogovor o EAES ekonomicheski vyigoden Kazakhstanu - Nazarbayev*, Tengrinews, May 27, 2014, [http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/dogovor-o-eaes-ekonomicheski-vyigoden-kazakhstanu-nazarbaev-256031](http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/dogovor-o-eaes-ekonomicheski-vyigoden-kazakhstanu-nazarbaev-256031); N. Zayavil, *Chto Kazakhstan mozhet vyiti iz EAES*, Gazeta Ru, August 30, 2014, [http://www.gazeta.ru/business/news/2014/08/30/n\\_6439065.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/business/news/2014/08/30/n_6439065.shtml); [http://akorda.kz/ru/page/page\\_218761\\_vstrecha-s-predstavitelami-vedushchikh-otchestvennykh-telekanalov#page](http://akorda.kz/ru/page/page_218761_vstrecha-s-predstavitelami-vedushchikh-otchestvennykh-telekanalov#page).

<sup>40</sup> *Nazarbayev: V sluchaye peregibov s gosyazykom nas zhdot sud'ba Ukrainy*, Forbes KZ, August 25, 2014, [http://forbes.kz/process/nazarbaev\\_v\\_sluchae\\_peregibov\\_s\\_gosyazykom\\_nas\\_jdet\\_sudba\\_ukrainyi](http://forbes.kz/process/nazarbaev_v_sluchae_peregibov_s_gosyazykom_nas_jdet_sudba_ukrainyi).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*





sanctions against Russia have so far not directly affected Kazakhstan.<sup>42</sup> Since Russia in turn has banned some Western imports, Kazakhstan has actually increased its export of agricultural products, including vegetables, fruit and meat.<sup>43</sup>

## Kazakhstan as a Partner of NATO and Its Importance in Russian Security Strategy

Since gaining its independence in 1991, Kazakhstan's leadership has built and developed balanced defence and security ties internationally to include closer cooperation with NATO through the PfP and related programmes.<sup>44</sup> The Ukraine crisis has had no impact upon this, nor has it damaged Astana's close relations with Moscow. In recent years Astana further diversified its international military cooperation to include India, Israel and South Korea. Since 2010, the country has hosted a biennial arms show (KADEX) to facilitate the growth of its fledgling defence industry.<sup>45</sup>

Kazakhstan also participates in annual international peacekeeping exercises to boost its peace support capabilities by raising its peacekeeping brigade (KAZ-BRIG) to NATO standards. Originating as a trilateral exercise (Steppe Eagle) in 2003, with the US and UK, this now includes other countries. Nonetheless, Kazakhstan's defence and security cooperation is mainly with Russia, notably in highly sensitive areas, and will likely remain so for the foreseeable future.<sup>46</sup>

Kazakhstan's Armed Forces, Security Forces and Intelligence Services closely follow Russian models, sharing common approaches to strategy and many other areas of defence and security.<sup>47</sup> This facilitates higher levels of cooperation and interoperability between the two countries<sup>48</sup> than Kazakhstan experiences with any other country. Russia's influence on Kazakhstan's officer corps, as well as its security and intelligence personnel, is reflected in levels of participation in foreign defence and security courses. While Kazakhstan does send personnel to courses run by NATO members, including those at the Marshall Center, significantly higher numbers go to Russia.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *Vstrecha predstaviteleyami vedushchikh otechestvennykh telekanalov*, Akorda, [http://www.akorda.kz/ru/page/page\\_218761\\_vstrecha-s-predstaviteleyami-vedushchikh-otechestvennykh-telekanalov](http://www.akorda.kz/ru/page/page_218761_vstrecha-s-predstaviteleyami-vedushchikh-otechestvennykh-telekanalov).

<sup>43</sup> *Nazarbayev: V sluchaye peregibov s gosyazykom nas zhdot sud'ba Ukrainy*, Forbes KZ, August 25, 2014, [http://forbes.kz/process/nazarbaev\\_v\\_sluchae\\_peregibov\\_s\\_gosyazykom\\_nas\\_jdet\\_sudba\\_ukrainyi](http://forbes.kz/process/nazarbaev_v_sluchae_peregibov_s_gosyazykom_nas_jdet_sudba_ukrainyi).

<sup>44</sup> *Kazakhstan-NATO Cooperation Document Drafted*, Moscow, Interfax, January 13, 2006; *NATO to Help Strengthen Kazakhstan's Military*, Almaty, Interfax-Kazakhstan, October 5, 2006; M. Altynbayev, *Partnership Role in the Defense Reform: From Prague to Istanbul*, Brussels, Speech at Defense Ministers Session of EAPC, December 2, 2003.

<sup>45</sup> *KADEX 2014*, <http://kadex.kz/en/>; *CASSIDIAN at Kazakhstan Defence Exposition KADEX 2012*, May 3, 2012, <http://www.defpro.com/news/details/35058/>; D. Okasov, *II International Exhibition of Weapons and Military-Technical Equipment "KADEX-2012"*, Tengri News, May 3, 2012; See: Kazakhstan Engineering: [http://www.ke.kz/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=71%3A2010-12-20-20-38-45&catid=61%3A2010-12-20-20-35-35&Itemid=28&lang=en](http://www.ke.kz/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=71%3A2010-12-20-20-38-45&catid=61%3A2010-12-20-20-35-35&Itemid=28&lang=en); [http://www.ke.kz/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=20&Itemid=37&lang=en](http://www.ke.kz/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=20&Itemid=37&lang=en).

<sup>46</sup> In an interview in 2009, Lieutenant-General Abay Tasbulatov, Commander of Kazakhstan's Republican Guard, reviewed the development of military, training and military education and stated: "The Russian Federation occupies a special place among our regional security partners. Multiple documents that legally bind our mutual aspiration to eternal friendship and partnership regulate all areas of cooperation, including in the military sphere. Servicemen from Kazakhstan are educated at Russian military educational institutions; agreements to deliver weapons and military hardware are being implemented." Lieutenant-General A. Tasbulatov, "Towards Establishing Military Security," *Krasnaya Zvezda*, May 28, 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Kazakhstan's most recent military doctrine was signed into law in 2011 and places great emphasis upon its close defence ties to Moscow and cooperation through the CSTO and the SCO. See: "Presidential Decree No. 161," *Military Doctrine of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, October 11, 2011, <http://mod.gov.kz/mod-en/index.php/2009-06-26-02-25-27>; "Law on National Security," January 6, 2012, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, January 17, 2012; "Nazarbayev Held a Meeting of Kazakhstan's Security Council," October 28, 2011, [http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics\\_sub/5306/](http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics_sub/5306/).

<sup>48</sup> M. Laumulin, "Strategicheskie Aspekty Otnosheniy Kazakhstana s Zapadom: SSha, NATO," in B. Sultanov (ed), *Kazakhsta v Sovremennom Mire: Realii I Perspektivy*, Almaty, KISI, 2008; M. Nurgaliev, "Kazakh-US Military-Political Cooperation In The Context of US Geopolitical Interests In Central Asia," *Central Asia And The Caucasus Journal of Social and Political Studies*, No. 2 (44), 2007; R. Burnashev and I. Chernykh, *Security in Central Asia: Methodological Frames of Analysis*, Almaty, 2006; "The Military Balance 1992-2011," London, *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 1993-2008; P. Petersen, "Control of Nuclear Weapons in the CIS," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Jane's Information Group, July 1, 1993.

<sup>49</sup> C. K. Bartles, "Challenges in Building Partner Capacities: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Security Assistance Programs in Kazakhstan," Kansas, *FMSO*, 2010; M. McCarthy, "The Limits of Friendship: Security Cooperation in Central Asia," AL, *Maxwell Air Force Base*, Air University Press, 2007; J. Nichol, "Central Asia's Security: Issues and Implications for U.S. Interests," RL-30294, Washington DC, *Congressional Research Service*, January 29, 2008.



Through joint or multilateral exercises, Kazakhstan maintains a high level of interoperability with its Russian counterparts.<sup>50</sup> This involves all its 70,500-strong military, paramilitary and security forces, while only around 350 are deemed to have a level of NATO interoperability (1st Battalion KAZBAT, functioning with a shell-like structure, and the still only partly formed peacekeeping brigade KAZBRIG). There is particularly close intelligence cooperation between Kazakhstan and Russia.<sup>51</sup>

Among the multilateral organizations in which both countries further deepen their defence and security relationship are the SCO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Following proposals from Astana in late 2008 and discussions among its members, in June 2009 the CSTO formed Collective Rapid Reaction Forces (*Kollektivnye Sil Operativnogo Reagirovaniya* –KSOR).<sup>52</sup> Uzbekistan did not agree to contribute forces and in June 2012 suspended its membership of the CSTO. The bulk of the KSOR is provided by Russia and Kazakhstan. Russia's elite Airborne Forces (*Vozdushno Desantnye Voyska*—VDV) provides the 98th VDV Division and the 31st Air Assault Brigade (AAB) and Special Forces, while Kazakhstan's contribution, the largest from Central Asia, includes the 37th AAB, Special Forces and a coastal defence unit. Through its close interaction with Russia in the CSTO, Kazakhstan not only confirms its alliance with Russia, but serves an important security role for Moscow within Central Asia.<sup>53</sup>

It is also worth noting the legal and legislative basis

for Kazakhstan's defence cooperation with Russia, in order to highlight its essential role in Russia's Central Asian security policy.<sup>54</sup> More than 60 legally binding bilateral documents, together with membership of the CSTO and SCO, serve to cement the close defence and security ties between Kazakhstan and Russia. Moreover, while much of this is rooted in the foundational bilateral defence treaty signed in 1994, that same treaty includes a clause prohibiting either country from engaging in military intelligence activities against the other. Russia attaches premium value to its security ties to Kazakhstan; especially to its role in sensitive strategic areas, no more so than in air defence and ballistic missile defence.<sup>55</sup>

### *Air Defence*

A far-reaching element in bilateral defence cooperation is not only the creation of a joint air defence system, which has proved more problematic to implement within the CIS, but its upgrade to a fully integrated air defence system.<sup>56</sup> In addition to technology transfers and purchases of Russian air defence assets in recent years, this drive to integrate the air defence systems of the two states was exemplified by Moscow taking the unusual step of including Kazakhstan in its unified system of state identification, used by its Armed Forces and security structures. Significant in this respect are the radar beacon transponders of the *Parol* (password) system (*Yedinaya Sistema Gosudarstvennogo Radiolokatsionnogo Opoznavaniya* –YeS-

<sup>50</sup> A. Tsyganok, "Heirs of the Empire: Military cooperation by CIS countries," *Centralasia.ru*, February 10, 2006.

<sup>51</sup> "The Military Balance," Chapter Five, Russia and Eurasia, *IJSS*, February, 2015, pp. 167-68, 180-82.

<sup>52</sup> *KSOR Organization of the CSTO*, [http://www.mamf.ru/odkb\\_mamf/ksor/ksor.pdf](http://www.mamf.ru/odkb_mamf/ksor/ksor.pdf); "Kazakhstan Ratifies Pact On Formation of CSTO Forces," *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, March 15, 2012.

<sup>53</sup> See: M. Barabanov, K. Makienko, and R. Pukhov, "Military Reform: Toward the New Look of the Russian Army," Moscow, *CAST*, July, 2012; M. Barabanov, "Military-Technical Cooperation Between Russia and Central Asia," Moscow, Moscow Defence Brief, *CAST*, No. 4, 2010.

<sup>54</sup> See: M. Laumulin, "Kazakhstan and Russia: Relations as Part of Russia's Central Asian Strategy," Almaty, Central Asia's Affairs, *KazISS*, No. 4, 2008, pp. 20-27.

<sup>55</sup> M. Gubaidullina and B. Somzhurek, *The Formation of the Legal Basis for Military and Political Cooperation Between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation*, Moscow, Information and Analysis Centre, Moscow State University, August 22, 2007; *Treaty between the Republic of Kazakhstan and Russian Federation on Military Cooperation, signed in Moscow on 28 March 1994*, <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/940328.htm>.

<sup>56</sup> U. Vylegzhanina, "The Security of the CIS Air Borders Has Been Discussed in Kaliningrad," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, July 8, 2012; "Kazakhstan Signs Agreement to Buy More Russian Military Aviation Equipment," *RFE/RL*, August 23, 2007.



GRLO). The YeGRLO is the Russian equivalent of the Mk XII Identification, Friend or Foe (IFF) system used by the US and NATO.<sup>57</sup>

A paramount consideration in this air defence system is securing Russia's long-term access to the strategically crucial radar facility in Balkhash in Kazakhstan. Balkhash Radar Station (also known as Sary Shagan radar node and Balkhash-9) is the location for two generations of Soviet and Russian early warning radars. The existing radar node provides coverage of western and central China, India, Pakistan and possible submarine missile launches from the Bay of Bengal. This facility also forms a key part of Russia's plans to develop a unified space system for the detection of ballistic missile launches far beyond its borders.<sup>58</sup> Since 2012, the site has been run by the Russian Aerospace Defence Forces (VKO). Russia is currently upgrading the radar facility in Balkhash, due to complete work on the experimental Neman-P radar by 2016. According to sources in the Strategic Rocket Forces, the Neman-P will monitor the air-space situation and aid the flight parameters and targeting of the A-135 anti-ballistic missile defence system protecting Moscow.<sup>59</sup>

Moscow's efforts to promote political and economic integration projects with its CIS neighbours has included Kazakhstan in such initiatives and building a joint air defence system perfectly illustrates such trends. While this offers the prospect of deeper integration with Moscow and may imply that the government in Kazakhstan has made a strategic choice in tying the country's future defence development to Russia, there are also conflicting signals.<sup>60</sup> On 15 May 2014, Kazakhstan's Senate ratified the joint air de-

fence agreement with Russia, binding both countries to cooperate more closely in this sensitive security area while utilizing the mechanism to create a future regional system. Part of the joint air defence system involves the pro bono transfer to Kazakhstan of several sets of Russian air defence surface-to-air missile system S-300. Nevertheless, by 22 May (while the third biennial military expo was being hosted in Astana), KADEX 2014, an air defence deal, was signed with the French defence company Thales to supply GM 400 radars to boost air defence capabilities.<sup>61</sup> Despite closer defence integration with Moscow, Kazakhstan retains considerable scope to pursue international security partnership arrangements to suit its own interests.

Quite apart from the obvious role played by the Balkhash radar node in Russia's nuclear security, a bilateral military exercise in June 2011 held in eastern and southeastern Kazakhstan witnessed the first rehearsed use of joint air defence structures to repel a cruise missile attack. During Shygys 2011, Kazakhstan's Air Force scrambled MiG-31 aircraft to intercept cruise missiles in the country's airspace; L-39 training aircraft were used for simulation purposes.<sup>62</sup>

Since the fear of a possible surprise missile attack on the Russian Federation features very high among the priorities of the Russian Military Doctrine, it is abundantly obvious that Moscow also attaches great importance to uninterrupted access to strategic facilities in Kazakhstan such as the Balkhash radar node. The risks to Russian security resulting from a decision by Astana to suspend its use of Balkhash during a hypothetical Russian threat to Kazakhstan's territorial

<sup>57</sup> "Vozdushno Kosmicheskaya Oborona," No. 1, 2007, No. 3, 2009.

<sup>58</sup> V. Myasnikov, *Yedinaya kosmicheskaya sistema predupredit o yadernom napadenii*, Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obozreniye, October 17, 2014, [http://nvo.ng.ru/armament/2014-10-17/1\\_shojgu.html](http://nvo.ng.ru/armament/2014-10-17/1_shojgu.html).

<sup>59</sup> "Russia to upgrade radar in Kazakhstan involved in testing Moscow's missile defence," *ITAR-TASS*, August 26, 2014.

<sup>60</sup> "Russia, Kazakhstan to Merge Their Air Defense Systems in 2013 - Kazakh Air Defense Commander," *Interfax-AVN*, July 11, 2012; "Kazakhstan Ratifies Military Related Agreement With Russia," *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, June 12, 2012.

<sup>61</sup> *Thales Raytheon Systems Ground Master 400 Radars Selected to Strengthen Kazakhstan's Air Defense Capability*, May 23, 2015, <http://www.przoom.com/news/143195/>.

<sup>62</sup> "Shygys 2011," *Krasnaya Zvezda*, June 25, 2011.



integrity would arguably be too high. Moreover, there are other complicating factors related to the complexity of the operational environment which serve to further mitigate the risks to Kazakhstan's security from "Russian aggression."

## Kazakhstan and Central Asia as a Potential Theatre of Russian Military Operations

One of the critical lessons, based upon analyses of Russian military actions in Crimea and Donbas, is that Russia's Armed Forces were used in distinctive ways and their force-mix and deployments were shaped by the uniqueness of the local operational environment.<sup>63</sup> At the outset, therefore, it is necessary to establish that Central Asia more broadly, and Kazakhstan in particular, differs greatly from the operational environment in both Ukrainian theatres. These distinctions relate to language, ethnicity, history, culture, socio-economic factors, religion, politics, geography and topography. Two critical distinctions must be identified here between Astana and Kyiv, even before considering defence and security interactions with Moscow: Kazakhstan, unlike Ukraine, is a Eurasian country with a viable and growing economy, while the former has chosen a Eurasian economic integration path with the economies of Russia and Belarus.

Some examples suffice to underscore some of the rudimentary differences. The linguistic mixture in Central Asia is much broader than in Ukraine, with the presence of growing numbers of local citizens speaking their own Turkic languages. The so-called "green men" would find such areas exponentially more challenging than in Donbas or Crimea; they would be rather obvious outsiders and easily identifiable to locals, as well as to local

security and intelligence forces. Indeed, unlike Slavic Ukraine, Central Asian states have experienced steady decline in the numbers of ethnic Russians living in the countries since the collapse of the USSR in 1991. The potential operational environment in these areas is also particularly demanding in terms of topography, ranging from the mountainous areas of Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan, to practical issues of over-land military transit rights to transfer Russian forces to future crisis zones in the region.<sup>64</sup>

Assessing any modern military operational environment also requires that domestic religious and cultural differences be taken into account. In Central Asia, unlike Ukraine, the Muslim religion is well represented. There are also regional political factors that serve to limit Russia's scope to intervene as it did in Ukraine. According to discussions the author has had with Uzbek and Russian specialists, for instance, Tashkent's objections to the possible deployment of Russian "peacekeeping" forces to southern Kyrgyzstan during the Osh crisis in June 2010 were a major factor in eliminating this from the Kremlin's options. Moscow needs Tashkent's tacit consent in order to become militarily involved in resolving a security crisis within the Fergana Valley; without Uzbekistan's approval for Russian actions, the logistics, transfer and support of Russian troops and military hardware would be problematic at best.

Similarly, in terms of Russian forces being deployed, together with heavy equipment, into a security crisis arising in the Central Asian states bordering Afghanistan (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), Russian strategic mobility remains heavily tied to railway infrastructure.<sup>65</sup> This means that Moscow is entirely dependent upon Astana granting overland military transit rights during any such security crisis; to deal with an erup-

<sup>63</sup> M. Czuperski, J. Herbst, E. Higgins, A. Polyakova, and D. Wilson, *Hiding in Plain Sight: Putin's War in Ukraine*, The Atlantic Council, May 28, 2015, [https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/content\\_link/f8pw7M6QPsbBeIHP9vegDrZdtiGbk0ZMKO02XzQT1PpBbrGTaZv3XStnfONZ8n0Z](https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/content_link/f8pw7M6QPsbBeIHP9vegDrZdtiGbk0ZMKO02XzQT1PpBbrGTaZv3XStnfONZ8n0Z).

<sup>64</sup> W. D. O'Malley, "Asian and South Caucasus as an Arena of Operations: Challenges and Constraints," in *Fault lines of Conflict in Central Asian and the South Caucasus. Implications for the US Army*, ed. O. Oliker and T. S. Szayna, Santa-Monica, RAND Corporation, 2003.

<sup>65</sup> A. Ramm, *The Ukraine Test: New Image of Armed Forces Spoiled by Field Kitchens*, *Voyenno-Promyshlenny Kuryer*, April 29, 2015, <http://vpk-news.ru/articles/25027>.





tion of violence in Central Asia closer to Afghanistan and prevent wider Central Asian destabilization, Russia needs Kazakhstan's support and cooperation. Certainly lighter armed Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) could deploy rapidly in the early phases of such future combat operations. However, reinforcement and logistical supply, as well as moving heavy equipment, would demand access to military transit through Kazakhstan's railway system. These background facts and defence planning realities are reflected in numerous bilateral and multilateral military exercises, with the key focus of the latter being the rehearsal of intervention in Central Asia by the CSTO. Asserting that Russia poses a possible security threat to Central Asia, therefore, is to entirely misread regional dynamics.

There are other operational factors at play for Russia in the Central Asian context, such as military basing or the scope for action depending on the specifics of a local security crisis. Russia maintains an airbase at Kant, near Bishkek under the umbrella of the CSTO and its former 201st Motorized Rifle Division now forms its base in Tajikistan headquartered in Dushanbe, with force elements in Kulyab and Kurgan-Tyube. However, these force sizes in Russia's Central Asian bases are comparatively modest; Kant hosts approximately 500 Russian personnel and the 201st military base is up to 5,000 strong.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, a large portion of the military personnel in the latter are conscripts, and prior to conducting joint or CSTO/SCO military exercises Russia frequently boosts the contract personnel element by moving contractors from its bases in the Central Military District. In contrast, the legal treaty on the Black Sea Fleet – in force at the time of Russia annexing Crimea permitted stationing up to 20,000 Russian military personnel.

Russia's Crimea operation in February-March 2014 depended first and foremost on the existence of the

large Black Sea Fleet base in Sevastopol, from which its forces began to covertly move across the peninsula, in addition to local support from the population. It also occurred in the context of a weak government in Kyiv struggling to establish its legitimacy; in stark contrast to most of the well-established governments in Central Asia.<sup>67</sup> Russian analysts have argued that tacit support from the local population in Crimea explains why Ukrainian military personnel did not open fire on Russian troops, though other factors were at play. Replicating a Crimea-style scenario in Central Asia collapses on both these points – Russia lacks a large enough military base to covertly deploy forces or transfer reinforcements, and cannot rely upon the support of the local population.<sup>68</sup>

Equally, although Russia has access to a number of military facilities in Kazakhstan, including the vital radar node in Balkhash, the operational environment in the vast country is potentially even more problematic. In a hypothetical bilateral crisis prompting Moscow to contemplate an intervention, Russia has very little existing military footprint within Kazakhstan. There are additional factors which serve to further reduce the chances of such an operation occurring or succeeding, even if the motive existed. In addition to limited deployment options, with such action likely to sever Moscow's defence relations with Kazakhstan and de facto terminate its overland transit rights, Russian decision-makers would need to take account of a still greater level of sensitivity. If discussion about intervening in southern Kyrgyzstan at the request of the host interim government in 2010 was effectively thwarted due to concerns expressed by Tashkent, then the same would be the case as Russia pondered some type of "land-grab" in a country bordering China; it is not only unimaginable that Moscow would act in this way, not least given the undoubtedly close defence and security ties (Kazakhstan is Russia's legal ally), but

<sup>66</sup> "The Military Balance," Chapter Five, Russia and Eurasia, *IISS*, February, 2015, pp. 167-68, 180-82.

<sup>67</sup> R. Pukhov, *Mifo gibrinoy voynye*, Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obozreniye, May 29, 2015, [http://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2015-05-29/1\\_war.html](http://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2015-05-29/1_war.html).

<sup>68</sup> M. Czuperski, J. Herbst, E. Higgins, A. Polyakova, and D. Wilson, *Hiding in Plain Sight: Putin's War in Ukraine*, The Atlantic Council, May 28, 2015, [https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/content\\_link/f8pw7M6QPsbBeIHP9vegDrZdtiGbk0ZMKO02XzQT1PpBbrGTaZv3XStnfONZ8n0Z](https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/content_link/f8pw7M6QPsbBeIHP9vegDrZdtiGbk0ZMKO02XzQT1PpBbrGTaZv3XStnfONZ8n0Z).



to do so while ignoring China would be impossible.

In the mid-1990s, President Nursultan Nazarbayev's decision to relinquish the inherited Soviet nuclear weapons on the territory of Kazakhstan was facilitated by a series of security guarantees from the leading nuclear powers, including China. Indeed, this security development arguably formed the foundation for Kazakhstan's "multi-vector" foreign policy, to avoid preferring any one power over another in its foreign relations. In February 1995, Beijing declared that it respected and granted Kazakhstan's request to officially declare that China would not resort to first use, and would not use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear state, while appealing to other nuclear powers to "strengthen the security of non-nuclear states" and "in particular, that of Kazakhstan." Nazarbayev wrote to his counterpart Jiang Zemin, noting "with great satisfaction the Chinese government's affirmation of a security guarantee to Kazakhstan." Beijing reaffirmed this pledge publicly on 5 April 1995, and in June 1996 Jiang Zemin addressed the parliament in Kazakhstan, again repeating China's assurances.<sup>69</sup>

There are serious geopolitical barriers – military operational and linked to likely second and third order consequences – standing in the path of any hypothetical Russian intervention in Kazakhstan.<sup>70</sup> Even if a set of unpredictable events occurred and Moscow were to consider some type of punitive measures infringing Kazakhstan's sovereignty, there are major hurdles in the way. There is the question of China's nuclear guarantee; Beijing's guarantee to uphold Kazakhstan's sovereignty; the lock-down which would ensue on military transit rights across Kazakhstani territory, greatly reducing Moscow's capability to respond to a real security crisis in Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan, as well as the problem that Kazakhstan and Russia are legally bound allies within the CSTO. At the very least the

latter would most certainly crumble. So too, as already noted, would Moscow's economic integration plans through the EEU. The possible disruption to energy flows would certainly shake investor confidence and cause concern for numerous state actors and stakeholders. This is not to mention that such an intervention would be a radical departure from the Kremlin's policy of seeking stability in Central Asia, rather than upheaval and disunity. The knock-on impact within the region would be unpredictable and damage Moscow's interests in the region.

Consequently, despite some scaremongering narratives in some Western media since the onset of the Ukraine crisis, Kazakhstan's leadership is evidently unconcerned about a theoretical risk of Russia repeating such action in Kazakhstan. Its more serious governmental concerns have revolved around the knock-on effect of US and EU sanctions on their neighbour. Indeed, security perspectives in Kazakhstan have long reflected this sense of close relations with Russia. In February 2008, Bulat Sultanov, the director of Kazakhstan's Institute of Strategic Studies under the country's president (KISI), noted that, "as a nuclear power, *Russia is a guarantor of national security for Kazakhstan.*" Sultanov stated that Kazakhstan protects Russia from challenges and sub-state threats emanating from Central Asia, while providing a link among Asian countries in favour of Russia. Since Vladimir Putin's presidency, according to Sultanov, relations between Russia and Kazakhstan have evolved to reach "a new level of strategic partnership and have a trend towards becoming allied relations."<sup>71</sup>

Moreover, given Astana's existing strong bilateral defence and security ties to Moscow, which are expressed in numerous areas of cooperation or common positions on threat assessment and the ongoing commitment to the CSTO, the pattern in recent years points

<sup>69</sup> Various reports in Remin Ribao, 9 February, 10 February, 6 April 1995; Remin Ribao, 6 December 1997.

<sup>70</sup> V. Ivanov and V. Mukhin, "Kaspiyskiy Strazh Primeryayet Amerikanskuyu Formu," *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, April 22, 2005; V. Mukhin, "Voyennye Vyzovy Kaspiyskogo Regiona," *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, January 22, 2004.

<sup>71</sup> "Russia's Ties With Kazakhstan Will Not Change After Presidential Election—Envoy," Almaty, *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, February 13, 2008.



in the opposite direction; Russia is clearly reluctant to act alone in Central Asia. Its joint exercises with Central Asian allies, including with China in the SCO, and its boost to the CSTO's rapid reaction capability since 2009 demonstrate consistent efforts to work alongside other actors and forces. During a meeting of the CSTO Council of Defence Ministers in Dushanbe on 4 June 2015, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu proposed extending the "snap inspection" of forces in Russia to the CSTO KSOR.<sup>72</sup> This may reflect a higher degree of anxiety in Moscow concerning the future impact of Afghanistan on Central Asian security, but the push for increased readiness in the KSOR shows that Moscow does not envisage acting alone in any Central Asian theatre.

This closeness and level of trust between Astana and Moscow is also confirmed in the current disposition of Kazakhstan's Ground Forces. Its large territory is divided into four regional military commands: Astana (North), West, South and East. The bulk of its military bases are located in South and East commands, whereas in the parts of the country sharing a border with Russia, straddling West, Astana and East Regional Commands there is only one Artillery Brigade (AB) located in Aktobe (400th AB); in Astana Command there is no military infrastructure close to the border with Russia, while in East Command there is one Multiple Rocket Launcher Brigade, one Gun Artillery Brigade, one Antitank Artillery Brigade and one Motorized Rifle Brigade (4th MRB).<sup>73</sup> East Regional Command appears to mainly act as a strategic reserve for the other commands. Among its higher readiness airmobile forces, comprising four Air Assault Brigades (AABs), there is one in Astana Regional Command (36th AAB), with the others in South Command (35th, 36th, and 37th AABs). Moreover, despite Kazakhstan's cooperation with NATO and its members and continued efforts to develop peace support capa-

bilities, its highest readiness brigade is the 37th AAB in Taldykorgan with very high numbers of *kontraktniki*—with is the main force element assigned to the CSTO KSOR. Notably, this structure (37th AAB) has no interaction with NATO. In terms of reacting to an external security crisis, Kazakhstan's military effectively faces south, and the lack of military basing and infrastructure in the border areas with Russia is entirely consistent with the country's security documents and close defence ties with Moscow; that is to say, there is no threat perception linked to the north – and, more importantly, this has not changed despite the Ukraine crisis. While some may argue that this leaves Kazakhstan unprepared in the event of a Russian attack, it is equally clear that Astana is not contingency planning for such a theoretical risk of an assault by a close ally.

## Summary and Conclusion

Central Asian governments have reacted with caution to the crisis in Ukraine. Far from seeing Russia as a possible threat to their sovereignty, these governments have been more concerned about the possible knock-on impact on their economies stemming from the sanctions regime against Russia; this is especially the case in Kazakhstan. However, a number of factors at play in Central Asia act as inhibitors to the emergence of a "Russia threat" to the territorial integrity of these states.

- Each Central Asian country has been hit by Western sanctions against Russia to a certain extent: Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan suffered reduced remittances from migrant workers, whose return to their home countries added to existing social economic pressures;
- In the context of the unfolding Ukraine cri-

<sup>72</sup> P. Felgenhauer, *Nu a vdrug? — o tom, chem opasny postoyannyye vnezapnyye ucheniya Minoborony RF*, Novaya Gazeta, June 6, 2015, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/columns/68721.html>.

<sup>73</sup> "The Military Balance," Chapter Five, Russia and Eurasia, *IISS*, February, 2015, pp. 167-68, 180-82.



sis, Kazakhstan continued its multi-vector foreign policy; apart from joining the EEU, Kazakhstan plans to enter the WTO by the end of 2015; Kazakh-China relations are prospering; and the country has signed a new Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU;

- Despite Russia's military activities and behaviour in Ukraine, it lacks the strategic mobility and military capacity to replicate such ventures within Central Asia. Moreover, none of the Central Asian countries are likely in future to pursue a policy of Euro-Atlantic integration;
- Since Russia's strategic mobility depends on access to railway infrastructure to move troops and heavy equipment, in a hypothetical infringement of Kazakhstan's sovereignty Moscow would likely lose overland transit rights across the country and thus experience severe limitation of its ability to act in response to a future crisis deeper within Central Asia. In effect, this would damage Russia's security as well as lowering its standing in the region;
- Russia and Kazakhstan are bound by treaty as defence and security allies, with policy closely coordinated through the CSTO, as well as mutual economic interests within the EEU; aggressive action against Kazakhstan would jeopardize Mos-

cow's economic integration aspirations and likely fracture the CSTO;

- Moscow is reluctant to engage in military operations unilaterally in Central Asia, and would certainly have to take into account Chinese interests in the region. In this context it is impossible to envisage the circumstances in which Moscow would act alone in Central Asia, let alone attack one of the Central Asian states;
- Kazakhstan continues to call for a peaceful solution to the crisis and is eager to act as a mediator if interested parties will allow this;
- Kazakhstan's leadership fully understands the sensitive issues regarding the Russian language, with President Nazarbayev making it clear that no changes to the existing legislation will occur and any attempts to disrupt the ethnic balance within the country will be strongly punished.

As already noted, relations between Kazakhstan and Russia form the bedrock of Russia's foreign and security policy in the region. Western policy-makers among NATO members could benefit from a deeper understanding of why the relationship between Astana and Moscow is so strong; possibly unlocking the potential future role of Kazakhstan as a bridge to ease tensions and defuse possible risks of confrontation and escalation.