

Kazakhstan Foreign Policy

Navigating Through Turbulence and Practicing Diplomacy in a Minefield (1-2)



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Oraib Al Rantawi

**Director General
Al Quds Center for Political Studies**

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On the outskirts of the largest and most perilous ongoing international conflicts lies Kazakhstan. It is situated within a semi-circular border arc that spans from the west to the east, encompassing the entire northern region of the country, with a length of approximately 7,000 kilometers. Its borders with its larger neighbor, China, extend over 1,500 kilometers from the east to the south. Kazakhstan also boasts the lengthiest coastline on the Caspian Sea, an inland sea that it shares with Iran, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Azerbaijan. The southern part of the country is bordered by Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.



Here, this vast country, spanning an area of 2.7 million square kilometers (ranking ninth globally and as the largest landlocked country, surpassing the combined area of Western Europe), and with a modest population of less than 20 million people, finds itself positioned on the front lines of the American-Western conflict with China. Moreover, it is situated at the heart of the global war theater in Ukraine and its surrounding regions. This war marks the first instance where the entire Western world confronts the successor state of the Soviet Union. Kazakhstan is also not far from Iran and its contentious issues, including the conflict with Azerbaijan, a religious partner of Tehran, and its bitter foe in terms of security, politics, interests and alliances.

Furthermore, Kazakhstan, "the beating heart of Central Asia", is considered the ultimate Eurasian state. Its western borders make it a neighboring country to Europe, similar to Russia. It is even more similar to Turkey, as a portion of the country's western territory is geographically located in Eastern Europe, on the banks of the Ural River, the water border between Europe and Asia. This has granted Kazakhstan a highly significant geopolitical position from a Western

perspective, a position that strengthens as the gap between East and West widens and becomes increasingly dangerous, as it is the case presently. This explains, among other factors, the intense European interest in this country. In fact, the European Union is the largest investor in Kazakhstan, accounting for no less than 40% of the total foreign direct investment in the past quarter-century.



It is a challenging geopolitical environment filled with threats that the country strives to transform into opportunities whenever possible, or at the very least, prevent their explosion and the devastating consequences that would bring. The country possesses abundant reserves of oil, gas, and uranium, attracting the attention of ambitious competing international and regional powers. During my first visit to Astana, upon a gracious invitation from its authorities, one question caught my attention: "Do you know the periodic table in chemistry?" I replied, "Yes." He answered, "All the elements listed in this table are available in varying, yet reasonable quantities within the depths of Kazakh land.

In such a geo-political environment, foreign policy mistakes are similar to those of an explosives' expert: the first mistake is the last one. This was clear in the answers of the Kazakh Deputy Foreign Minister, who described his country's diplomacy as a "diplomacy in a minefield." Caution, prudence, balance, and walking on tightropes are what characterize the most Astana's foreign policy. First of all, since Kazakhstan's independence (it was the last country to leave the Soviet Union), the country has been keen on establishing the best relations with the Russian Federation. It closely monitors the transformations in this country which has inherited the legacy of the Soviet Union, and often describes the relationship with Russia as strategic. Kazakhstan is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, led by Moscow, which includes countries that gained their independence from the Soviet Union. However, Kazakhstan is not under the illusions of Putinism. Behind closed doors, there is a considerable amount of

caution, or even concern, regarding Russia's tendency to reclaim the legacy of previous empires, both Czarist and communist. In Kazakhstan, there are elements which may lead Moscow to view it as a backyard to its vital space, especially considering that over 15% of the population is of Russian origin, forcibly relocated by Stalin to work in agriculture in the northern part of the



country to meet his country's needs and ensure a degree of food security for the second-largest country during the Cold War and the polar conflict.

However, Astana, the historical name of the city that would become the capital of Central Asia, bore the name of the first Kazakh president in the post-independence era, Nursultan Nazarbayev, for many years. He assumed the presidency of the country since it was known as 'The Soviet Socialist Republic of Kazakhstan' for seven years under the shadow of the Soviet Union. He worked closely with both Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, 'the engineer,' who was involved in almost every detail of building a beautiful, modern, well-organized, and clean European-style capital. He left his personal mark on every strategic landmark in the city, and to this day, the international airport bears his name.

Astana will not turn its back on Moscow; however, it will not put all of Kazakhstan's eggs in Russia's basket. The cost of aligning with Russia and Putin is no less than that of maintaining a hostile position. Astana nurtures balanced relations with its giant neighbor, China, and views it as a factor in maintaining a balance with Russia. Moreover, a good relationship with China, built on investment and shared interests, serves as a guarantee to prevent any Russian expansionist tendencies in Kazakhstan's northern territories from becoming more than a mere illusion.

On the other hand, Kazakhstan serves as a "bridge" between Asia and Europe, embodying vibrant aspects of Eurasia in terms of geopolitics, economics, and culture. The European continent, which is the largest investor in Kazakhstan and relies on its oil resources, constituting

8% of its carbon energy consumption, maintains diverse relationships with the country. Kazakhstan is a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and its good relations with Europe play a crucial role in maintaining a balanced and equitable foreign policy. Despite occasional challenges, whether related to human rights or the desire to distance the country further from Russia and align it closer to Brussels, these factors do not undermine the overall positive relationship between Kazakhstan and Europe.



Kazakhstan is also an active member of the Turkic States Organization, which became more active with the rise to power of the Turkish Justice and Development Party and Recep Tayyip Erdogan around two decades ago. In line with its own foreign policy, Kazakhstan plans to work on transitioning the Turkish script from Cyrillic to Latin, possibly starting from next year, after addressing certain issues related to conjugation and grammar rules. This step is part of the country's path towards globalization and integration into the global system while still maintaining its distinct Turkish roots among the majority of its population. This decision carries significant political implications, in addition to its underlying economic, practical, and logistical objectives.

We mentioned that Kazakhstan has succeeded in turning geopolitical challenges into opportunities, and for that reason the country has opened its doors to attract investments. This decision is grounded in the principle that the stability of the country is in the interest of every active international powers. In fact, any entity with interests to protect in any country around the world strives for the stability of that country. In less than a quarter of a century, Astana has attracted over \$400 billion in foreign direct investments, with the majority originating from European countries, followed by China, of course.

Kazakhstan is also planning to establish a Eurasian infrastructure for transportation that connects the heart of Asia with Europe through the Middle Corridor or the Trans-Caspian Route.

This grand, ambitious, and strategic transportation project aligns with China's Belt and Road Initiative and competes with Iran's planned strategic road projects with Pakistan and China, with an estimated cost of around \$20 billion. It serves as significant evidence of the potential for enormous financial returns while enhancing the country's position as a strategic link in the international transportation and trade system.

For a first-time visitor in Kazakhstan and Central Asia like me, attending one of the most important international forums, the Astana International Forum, which succeeded the Astana



Economic Forum (known as Central Asia's Davos), it is only natural to be interested in examining the country's approach to international conflicts in a polarized world influenced by events in Ukraine, Taiwan, and the intense pursuit of determining the direction and independence of the global system, especially in the midst of the most critical global crisis since World War II.

In all honesty, as someone deeply engaged in tracing the impact of political geography on Jordan's security and stability, as well as its role in shaping its foreign policies, and while contemplating the map of Kazakhstan and its neighboring countries, which are often seen as problematic and interventionist giants, I couldn't help but feel that our complaints in Jordan are often without reason. In Kazakhstan, they find themselves compelled to navigate treacherous waters, dancing naked with the sharks. In contrast, here in Jordan, we face our own set of challenges and risks, confronting weakened predators who are losing their fangs and claws. Kazakhstan presents a rare opportunity to learn how to swim in a turbulent sea.