Kazakhstan: Preserving stability

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At a time of heightened global uncertainties and shifting geopolitical dynamics, Kazakhstan seeks to maintain and promote stability in a world of turbulence and rapid change.

Celebrating the 32nd anniversary of Republic Day, when it proclaimed its sovereignty and independence from the USSR, Kazakhstan is again navigating a complex geopolitical landscape. At the crossroads of the EU, Russia and China, the country aims to maintain stability and peace abroad and within its borders as the resource-rich country becomes an inevitable international player in the coming green and digital revolutions.
As the largest country in Central Asia, Kazakhstan has not been spared the effects of climate change which are impacting the whole region, prompting the country to make plans to address environmental issues and move away from fossil fuels.

Kazakhstan generates more than 70% of its electricity from its abundant coal resources, which is among the cheapest to produce in the world, but the country has big green ambitions to move away from its dependency on fossil fuels.

“At the moment, the majority of our electricity comes from coal-fired power plants,” Kazakhstan’s Deputy Foreign Minister Roman Vassilenko told a press conference attended by Euractiv in Astana, adding that Kazakhstan’s current share of renewable energy is 5%.

According to Vassilenko, one of Kazakhstan’s main priorities is to develop low-carbon technologies, which will require an estimated $600 billion in investment to reach 50% renewable energy by 2030 and then carbon neutrality by 2060.

“In terms of environment, our goal is to be carbon neutral by 2060. This is ten years later than the European Union, but we think it is a realistic time for us to strive for this goal,” he added.

As such, coal-rich Kazakhstan already started investing in renewable energies, namely in wind and solar energies.

“Kazakhstan is almost as big as the EU, and in some parts, sun and wind is all there is, so why not use this potential?” a diplomatic source told Euractiv.

Recent wind energy projects include commissioning the 50 MW Stepnogorsk wind farm in northwest Kazakhstan and the development of the 100 MW Karatau wind farm project in southern Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan has set ambitious objectives regarding solar energy, aiming to reach 3 gigawatts (GW) of installed capacity by 2030. Recent projects include completing the 100 megawatt (MW) Nura solar power plant in 2023 and the ongoing construction of the 100 MW Baykonur solar power plant.

Global warming risks

Central Asian countries are highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, and Kazakhstan is no exception as intense heat waves, droughts, heavy rains, and other extreme weather events are becoming major environmental, economic, and social problems.

According to a World Bank report, temperatures in Kazakhstan are projected to rise faster than the global average and most other Asian countries, with a potential warming of 5.3°C by the 2090s, a risk that is increasingly being considered by citizens and lawmakers alike.

“The rising cost of life leads to some reflection, to deal not only with wages and pensions but also with the environment,” declared Aidos Sarym, secretary of the Committee on International Affairs, Defence and Security of the Lower House of the Kazakh Parliament.

According to him, there is a growing demand to create a green economy and to engage in ecology, especially “among the younger generation, who have already grown up with modern values, modern cinema and modern interests”.

Global warming poses significant water challenges in Central Asia, with melting glaciers, changing precipitation patterns, and increased competition for water resources becoming key issues, a diplomatic source told Euractiv.

“Global warming poses significant water challenges in Central Asia, with melting glaciers, changing precipitation patterns, and increased competition for water resources becoming key issues, a diplomatic source told Euractiv.

Water stress, drought risks, and impacts on agriculture and ecosystems are growing concerns that will require regional cooperation and sustainable water management to avoid future large-scale water-related conflicts in the region.

Geopolitics of water

Central Asia has significant water resources that are unevenly distributed and is now facing growing tensions over access to water.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union disrupted the water-energy exchange between upstream (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) and downstream (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) countries, leading to conflicts.

The region has experienced several tensions over using existing water infrastructure, such as the Toktogul dam project that he believed would endanger Uzbekistan’s vital cotton fields.

Today, more than ever, this issue is at the forefront of regional cooperation policies.

“We have to reckon with each other and sometimes even with the whims and fancies of some of our neighbours”, Sarym said, adding, however, that “the responsibility for moving things in the right direction lies with us.”

According to him, there is a need to create a water and energy consortium to understand how much water the region’s countries have and how it can be better.

“It all starts with accounting—a good environmental audit. Then understanding how much water we need”, Sarym said, calling for each country to specialise based on its natural resources to avoid wasting precious water.

“This race for the sake of the race threatens us,” he concluded.
Kazakhstan’s enduring commitment to the Afghan population

By Alibek Bakayev

Kazakhstan was quick to respond to the series of devastating quakes in Herat province of Afghanistan, guided by compassion, a timeless principle that should guide our actions in times of crisis, writes Alibek Bakayev. The recent series of powerful earthquakes in Herat province has left a trail of destruction and despair. Yet, Kazakhstan was quick to respond. Our operational search team promptly acted, demonstrating our unwavering dedication to helping those in dire need. Importantly, none of our fellow citizens, including those involved in the rescue efforts, sustained injuries during their mission.

In times of crisis, it is both our duty and privilege as public servants to lead by example, showing unwavering commitment to helping those who are vulnerable.

Our commitment to the Afghan people is not tied to the ever-changing political landscape. It stands as a testament to the enduring nature of our support, reflecting Kazakhstan’s dedication to providing humanitarian assistance and fostering strong ties.

In a world often consumed by politics and borders, there exists a timeless principle that should guide our actions in times of crisis: compassion.

Today, as the Afghan people contend with the aftermath of a devastating earthquake, we wish to underscore the enduring bond between Kazakhstan and Afghanistan that transcends political frontiers.

This bond is firmly founded on compassion, collaboration, and trade partnerships, with a primary focus on prioritizing the well-being of the people above all else.

The power of compassion

On 11 October, a massive cargo delivery of over 1600 tons arrived in Herat province, Afghanistan. This delivery included essentials like food, tents, clothing, and bedding, serving as a lifeline to those affected by a catastrophic earthquake.

What makes this gesture truly significant is that it represents Kazakhstan’s enduring tradition of generosity and human kindness.

This humanitarian aid is not a mere matter of policy; it is a genuine expression of our nation’s heart. Our shared humanity calls us to extend a helping hand to those in dire need.

Kazakh rescue teams have successfully cleared 76 locations of debris from demolished houses in the Nalorof district. Additionally, staff from the Disaster Medicine Center have been providing essential medical aid to the local population.

Notably, the Kazakh Emergencies Ministry has dispatched an operational and rescue unit to Afghanistan. Comprising 45 members, each with extensive experience in similar missions, this team is well-equipped for search and rescue operations.

It consists of skilled canine handlers, medical professionals, and paramedics from the Disaster Medicine Center.

“Firstly, we would like to thank the people of Kazakhstan, the country’s President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who provided assistance to us in this difficult time.

After accepting humanitarian aid, a special commission will discuss and decide where it will be sent. Now we are burying the dead and providing first aid to the injured. If there are any more affected, we are ready to assist them as well.

This support goes beyond immediate relief; it’s about building a foundation of hope and resilience in Afghanistan. It’s a pledge to accompany them on the path to recovery and rebuilding, regardless of the time it takes.

Furthermore, our dedication to the well-being of the Afghan populace aligns with a wider global initiative aimed at alleviating their distress. As an example, Australia has earmarked $1 million in assistance to aid the residents of Afghanistan in the aftermath of the destructive earthquake in Herat Province.

This calamity has intensified the preexisting severe humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, impacting 29.2 million individuals in critical need.

Transition to trade and economic relations

Our commitment to Afghanistan goes beyond compassion and solidarity; it also encompasses a strong trade relationship that contributes to the economic growth and stability of both our nations. A perfect example of this is the Kazakh-Afghan Business Forum, which took place on August 2-4, 2023 in Astana.

The history of trade relations
between Kazakhstan and Afghanistan is noteworthy, particularly the significant exports of flour. Kazakhstan aims to increase bilateral trade, surpassing the $988 million recorded last year and eventually reaching a goal of $3 billion.

The trade extends to a diverse range of goods, including flour, wheat, sunflower oil, and more. This substantial exchange of goods reflects a mutually beneficial partnership.

**Diversification of trade routes and perspective of cooperation**

Diversifying trade routes is essential for improved competitiveness and creating opportunities for businesses across various sectors. New transportation and logistics routes, including access to the Pakistani market and ports, are instrumental in this regard.

Kazakhstan’s interest in establishing new trade routes to Pakistan via Afghanistan and the agreements with key players underline our commitment to diversifying and expanding trade channels.

The energy sector presents promising avenues for cooperation. Kazakhstan is one of the largest oil and gas producers in the region. This cooperation may lead to projects related to the production and transportation of energy carriers, bolstering the economies of both nations.

Additionally, there are opportunities for imports from Afghanistan, particularly in the areas of fruits, vegetables, nuts, and high-quality Afghan carpets. Such collaborations contribute to the strengthening of both countries’ economies and underline the multifaceted nature of our relationship.
Rethinking global health initiatives in Astana

By Charles Szumski | euractiv.com

Speaking to Euractiv as one of the panelists at the conference, Dr Bernd Appelt, responsible for international development cooperation at the European Commission, gave a positive assessment of the dedication of Kazakhstan’s leadership.

He particularly praised its commitment to primary health care, which has led to remarkable improvements, including an increase in life expectancy and a reduction in child and maternal mortality in the former Soviet country.

“I have to say I find the steps that Kazakhstan has taken over the last 15 years really impressive,” Appelt said.

“During this period of commitment to primary health care, life expectancy has increased, and Kazakhstan has seen a reduction in child and maternal mortality. And it’s all because of this renewed commitment to primary health care,” he added.

According to the EU official, cases like Kazakhstan’s could set an example for its neighbours and potentially other developing countries.

“I think whether they like it or not, they will be a role model within the region,” Appelt said, adding: “The only way you can be a leader is by example. At the end of the day, you can talk, but if you don’t do what you say, you lose credibility after a while. So it seems to me that Kazakhstan will be a role model, given its results.

Rethinking global health initiatives

For Appelt, the 2018 Astana Declaration was necessary because it allowed for a renewed focus on primary health care and health systems.

“The Astana Declaration was necessary because in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the primary health care and health systems approach it promotes was forgotten and these disease-focused global health initiatives took centre stage,” he said.

According to him, such approaches are successful in tackling urgent problems such as AIDS or the COVID crisis but fail in the long term to address the needs of certain countries to strengthen their health systems.

He expressed his disappointment that COVID funds have not been used to strengthen primary health care in EU countries, which is what would ultimately help them to cope better with such crises.

“We need to set up transition systems to ensure that the new skills and equipment acquired during the emergency are effectively integrated into national health systems,” Appelt said.

Another example is AIDS. If you take Cambodia, the number of HIV patients is quite low because the pandemic is under control, partly because of investments from the Global Fund that were specifically designed to fight this particular problem,” he added.

However, he pointed out that there are considerably more insulin-dependent diabetes patients than HIV patients needing insulin but they will get their insulin free of charge because they are covered by the Global Fund – an international fund dedicated to fighting the deadliest infectious diseases – whereas non-HIV diabetics will not.

He added that this could take the form of a debt relief programme in exchange for investment in health, similar to the programme Germany used to help Pakistan invest in its education system in exchange for cancelling some of its debt to Berlin.

“Of course, there would have to be controls,” he said, “but it could definitely be applied to the financing of health systems.

Overall, Appelt remained optimistic about the future.

“Look at where China is today compared to 40 years ago in terms of health,” he said, adding that if the will is there, we have all the tools to build strong primary healthcare systems that will ultimately serve as the necessary pillars of efficient universal healthcare systems.
Kazakhstan: Balancing to the best of its ability in the heart of Eurasia

By Charles Szumski | euractiv.com

As the largest Central Asian nation, located on the fringes of the Russian and Chinese worlds but oriented towards the EU, Kazakhstan is performing a strategic balancing act to maintain its stability and position in the heart of Eurasia. Euractiv visited Kazakhstan as it celebrated the 32nd anniversary of its independence from the Soviet Union.

A key message from interlocutors was that the country is trying more than ever to pursue a multi-faced and balanced foreign policy that takes into account its powerful neighbours, its European trading partners, and the risks of domestic social unrest.

“The government eventually restored order with the help of Russian troops sent in the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), a military alliance led by Russia. According to Minaurov, after this experience, and also in the context of the war in Ukraine, Kazakhstan has resolutely taken a path that focused on independence from its northern neighbour. Astana does not recognise the 2022 annexation referendums in Russian-occupied Ukraine and has approached sanctions against Russia in a pragmatic way that surprised many in the EU,

Kazakhstan’s main trading partner.

“Kazakhstan has declared unambiguously that it will follow the sanctions regime. We maintain contacts with the relevant organisations on observing the sanctions regime, and I believe Germany should have no worries regarding possible steps to circumvent the sanctions regime,” President Kassym Jomart Tokayev declared during a visit to Berlin earlier this year.

Post-soviet realism

But Tokayev’s statement does not mean cutting all ties with Russia or fully aligning with Western sanctions either.

“Kazakhstan has positioned itself as a unifying mediator between East and West,” Roman Vassilenko, Kazakhstan’s deputy foreign minister, told a press conference on 23 October, underlying the need for Kazakhstan to apply an independent and pragmatic approach to foreign affairs.

But geography and infrastructure are another important aspect, as Minaurov sees it, as Russia controls Kazakhstan’s oil exports to the West.

“The use of Russian pipelines remains crucial to Kazakhstan’s economy. That’s why severing ties with Russia, be they economic, political or even cultural, is something of a utopia. And like it or not, Kazakhstan can’t afford it,” Minaurov said, echoing a Kazakh government source who spoke to Euractiv.

“Kazakhstan has not joined the sanctions regime,” the government source explained to Euractiv, adding that the country shares a total of 50 border crossings with Russia alone.

According to Minaurov, after this experience, and also in the context of the war in Ukraine, Kazakhstan has resolutely taken a path that focused on independence from its northern neighbour.

As it was in this context that President Tokayev attended the Third Forum on International Cooperation “One Belt, One Road” in Beijing on 17-18 October, where 30 trade documents worth a total of $16.54 billion were signed between Astana and Beijing.

Among the most notable documents is an agreement to increase the capacity of the (TITR) fivefold, to 500,000 containers per year.

Commenting on what has already been achieved, Tokayev noted that “about 85% of all overland transit traffic from China to Europe passes through Kazakhstan” and that $35 billion has been allocated over 15 years for the development of highways.

According to Minaurov, China’s massive investment in Kazakhstan should be seen as an opportunity, rather than the concern expressed by some foreign diplomats.

“I don’t think we should see China as a risk. China represents a lot of opportunities for Kazakhstan’s economy and industry. We should see China as a neighbour and, of course, as the enormous market that it is’, he said, downplaying the fears around Chinese overdue influence in Kazakhstan.

Nevertheless, Euractiv heard several diplomats expressing concerns about Kazakhstan falling into the “Chinese orbit” as some other countries did along the new Chinese Silk Roads.

“It seems unlikely at the moment, but we’ll see,” one of them told Euractiv, with an explicit glance at the Chinese worker’s building the Chinese-funded high-speed railway that will connect Astana and its airport by 2025.
Kazakhstan becomes an attractive ‘nuclear’ player

By Charles Szumski | euractiv.com

Languages: Deutsch

With Kazakhstan set to hold a referendum on whether to build its first nuclear power plant, the uranium-rich country is emerging as an attractive player in the field of nuclear energy and strategic minerals at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, attracting increasing international attention.

Kazakhstan will hold a referendum in the near future to decide whether to build its first nuclear power plant, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev said in his annual address to the Kazakh people in September.

The government of Kazakhstan, which is the fastest and resource-rich Central Asian nation, has long discussed the idea, citing the need to diversify its power generation capacity, and has even identified a proposed site for the plant in the south-eastern Almaty region.

“We have the technology, we have the resources and we have the will to develop nuclear power generation, provided that the people of Kazakhstan vote in favour of such a move in the national referendum”, Kazakhstan’s deputy Foreign Minister Roman Vassilenko told a press conference in Astana, attended by Euractiv.

He added that a precise date had not yet been set but would be announced “in due course.”

According to Astana-based expert Issatay Minuarov, the referendum is likely to yield a positive answer, and open the way to the construction of the first nuclear power plant.

“In general, people are not against the idea,” he said, adding that some fears remain due to the country’s history with nuclear power. He referred to the nuclear test site of Semipalatinsk in northeast Kazakhstan, where the USSR conducted 456 nuclear tests from 1949 until 1989 with little regard for their effect on the local people or environment.

Reservations on nuclear despite huge potential

Today’s Kazakhstan is an undisputed leader in uranium mining, accounting for 42% of world production, with the Kazatomprom National Atomic Company accounting for 22%, the state fund Sairnuk Kazyna reported on 29 August.

Kazatomprom is therefore the world’s largest uranium producer, with its subsidiaries, affiliates and joint ventures developing 26 deposits grouped into 14 uranium mining companies.

But in spite of these riches, Kazakhstan abandoned nuclear energy after the Soviet era due to environmental and proliferation concerns and a desire to project a new image as a responsible and peace-loving country.

Despite inheriting a large stockpile of nuclear weapons from the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan gave up this arsenal and joined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to reduce the risk of nuclear proliferation.

“On 29 August, the world observed the UN International Day against Nuclear Tests, the same day Kazakhstan closed the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site in 1991 and voluntarily relinquished the world’s fourth-largest nuclear arsenal,herited from the Soviet Union,” Vassilenko said during the press conference.

“This action underscores our unwavering commitment to global stability and a nuclear-weapon-free world,” he added.

Nuclear balancing act

But the race towards strategically important minerals led the country to envision a change in its energy mix and include more nuclear in a bid to reach its carbon neutrality goals it set for 2060.

Today, Kazakhstan’s main source of electricity is coal, which accounts for around 70% of the country’s power generation and is among the cheapest in the world to produce. Adding nuclear power to the mix seems a logical step, but not without some delicate geopolitical considerations.

“We’re now considering France, South Korea, Russia, and China as countries to work with us on this nuclear plant,” said expert Issatay Minuarov, adding that it will require a certain amount of political tact and balance to manage the expectations of these different actors.

A source close to the issue confirmed to Euractiv that building the nuclear power plant is a geopolitical conundrum for Astana.

“On the one hand, the Kazakhs cannot risk being sanctioned by the EU, their main trading partner, by joining forces with Russia. On the other, aligning only with an EU country like France would send a very unpleasant signal to Moscow,” the source said.

The source recalled that the Kremlin used the perceived threat of a nuclear-capable Ukraine as one of the justifications for its invasion of the country in 2022.

“We’re not crazy enough to develop nuclear weapons,” Minuarov said, adding that Astana’s strong opposition to nuclear weapons and diplomatic efforts in this direction speak for themselves.

Renewed international interest

Kazakhstan’s reserves of uranium and other strategic minerals are now being eagerly courted by other international players, as evidenced by French President Emmanuel Macron’s visit to Astana on 1-2 November.

“I do not underestimate the geopolitical difficulties, the pressures and sometimes the jostling to which you may be subjected. France looks to you with great consideration, respect and friendship,” Macron declared in Astana.

France is the fifth largest foreign investor in Kazakhstan, ahead of China, thanks in particular to the presence of the oil group TotalEnergies, which jointly operates the large Kachagan field in the Caspian Sea. Bilateral trade amounted to €5.3 billion in 2022, mainly in hydrocarbons, and Kazakhstan also supplies France with almost 40% of its uranium.

Following Macron’s diplomatic trip, several contracts and declarations were signed, including a joint declaration of intent between France and Kazakhstan on cooperation in the field of strategic raw materials.

“But we are not the only ones looking in that direction”, the source said, as China and Turkey in particular are seeking to carve out a place for themselves in Central Asia.
Kazakhstan’s transport strategy advances in cooperation with global partners

By Marat Karabayev

In our view, BRI is one of the largest market... 

Since its independence, Kazakhstan has made great efforts to develop its transport and transit potential and modernise transport corridors, having allocated over the past 15 years over $35 billion for these purposes, writes Marat Karabayev.

Marat Karabayev is the minister of transport of Kazakhstan.

Today, our transport industry is an area of profitable investments.

The shortest routes from Europe to Central Asia, China and South-East Asia pass through our country. We have formed a network of efficient transit transcontinental corridors and routes.

TITR, or the Middle Corridor, is a single logistical solution linking transit flows between Europe, Central Asia and China. The route can become a continental bridge between the largest markets, halving the time of freight traffic and significantly reducing transport costs.

In 2022 and nine months of 2023, its cargo volumes have doubled.

We are working with our neighbours and partners in the region to regulate tariffs on the corridor. Today, we have already fixed the tariffs for container transportation on the route. We plan to stabilise and set them for at least five years.

In Tbilisi in October, Kazakh, Georgian, and Azerbaijani railways signed an agreement on establishing a joint venture on a parity basis to improve the quality of service on the Middle Corridor.

The expansion of the TITR Association will make it possible to promote the corridor approach along the route more effectively.

By the end of the year, the procedures for joining the Austrian Rail Cargo and other cargo operators from Germany should be finalised.

Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Hungary also expressed interest in joining the Association. My meetings with European Commissioners Adina Valean and Maros Šefčovič and EBRD President Odina Renaud-Basso in Brussels helped outline new horizons of practical partnership.

Today, we are also working with large European companies like Maersk, Alstom, DB Engineering, HHLA, Stadler, Jan De Nul and MSC.

Following President Tokayev’s visit to the US in September 2023, we signed a $1-billion agreement with the American WABTEC, a global provider of technology and digital solutions for railway transport.

China cooperation

Regarding the development of the Middle Corridor, our cooperation with China in the transport and transit sector cannot be overlooked. Kazakhstan has built effective interstate cooperation with China in all areas.

It was in Kazakhstan that the One Belt, One Road initiative (BRI) was first announced ten years ago, and today, our pragmatic participation in it is an essential component of this strategy.

In our view, BRI is one of the important platforms for international cooperation. Kazakhstan plays a special role in its implementation. As a huge inland continental state sharing a long border with China, we are making consistent efforts to serve as a transport and logistics hub of international importance.

For example, Kazakhstan accounts for about 85% of all land transit traffic from China to Europe.

We have launched such major infrastructure projects as the Kazakhstan-Chinese logistics centre in Liyangang, the Khorgos dry port, the Western Europe-Western China transit highway, and the railway corridor from China to Iran.

We plan to lay 1,300 kilometres of new railway tracks within three years.

For us, cooperation with our partners in the framework of BRI is an example of Kazakhstan’s major economic projects being paired with a global initiative.

This cooperation favourably influences the development of the Middle Corridor. On 14 October 2023, Kazakhstan and China approved a draft Agreement on the Development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, which will provide favourable conditions for the route’s development and attract additional transit and foreign trade cargoes.

EU cooperation

We believe that for the successful development of the Middle Corridor, it is necessary to develop cooperation with all participants of the route, including the EU.

Therefore, we are more than happy to see the readiness of the European side to work together, also based on the recommendations in the EBRD study on developing sustainable transport connectivity between Central Asia and the EU.

There are already projects in Kazakhstan that will help to match our infrastructure capacity to the positive outlook in the study estimations.

During his working visit to Kazakhstan in October 2023, Hors Classe Adviser of the European Commission Henrik Hololei spoke about advancing investment cooperation with the EU in transport and transit and underlined that sustainable, ready-to-go projects would be prioritised.

We are ready to take the steps to contribute to the sustainability, competitiveness and operational efficiency of the route. I would like to underline that the projects mentioned above are backed by the government of Kazakhstan and open to European investors.

Their realisation will benefit the region’s economic outlook and enhance the transit capacity between Asia and Europe.

European companies are welcome to explore shipbuilding, port development, aircraft manufacturing, and the launch of postal and commodity hubs in Kazakhstan. We are eager to use the Central Asia-EU Investors’ Forum platform in January in Brussels to announce flagship projects under the Global Gateway.

In Kazakhstan, we put high hopes on our potential to become the region’s new transport and trade hub. And the EU, with its excellent transport capacity running the common market, impactful economic power, and globally renowned companies, is invariably a partner of choice for us.

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