

KAZAKHSTAN AND THE STRATEGIC INTERESTS OF THE GLOBAL PLAYERS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Every Central Asian state today is concerned about its relations with the world powers, and Kazakhstan is no exception. This topic is even more urgent in the context of the global financial and economic crisis, when essentially all the world's countries have had to rethink their strategy on the international arena and make certain adjustments to their foreign political priorities. The global players want to retain their leading positions, the regional nations are trying to advance their positions as their stronger rivals backslide, while the economically undeveloped countries are hoping to avoid bankruptcy and loss of sovereignty.

But such active, ambitious, and resource-rich states as Kazakhstan are not locked in a bat-

tle for survival. The matter concerns broader problems. What will the world be like after the crisis and what place will Kazakhstan occupy in it? How will post-Soviet Central Asia further evolve? Can the regional leaders show their political will or will national egoism take the upper hand? How should the Central Asian states react to the world powers' strategy in the region? Will Central Asia become an independent entity of world politics, or will it miss its historical chance by becoming just another cog in the wheel of other nations' geopolitical projects and strategies?

Both the long-term prospects of the individual Central Asian states and the destiny of the region as a whole directly depend on finding the right answer to these and several other no less

complicated questions. Today's political elites must understand that they are responsible not only to the present, but also to the future gener-

ations. Today the ground is being prepared for the future. What will it yield—strong or weak states?

Kazakhstan and Russia's Central Asian Strategy

Russia occupies a historical place in Central Asia, so any talk about it “leaving” or “returning” to the region is pure rhetoric. Russia is a historical and geographical given, a geopolitical and geo-economic constant that each state must always keep in mind when drawing up its own foreign policy strategy. And finally, it represents common historical memory, close state and human ties, and the longest interstate land border in the world. So Russia will always be an exclusively important and priority partner of Central Asia and Kazakhstan.

But how successful is Russia in its Central Asian policy? Is it ready to engage in tough competition with the other global players in the new geopolitical conditions? How great are its current opportunities in the conditions of the global financial and economic crisis? Is it capable of conducting a consistent strategy regarding the region or will its policy again boil down to a perfunctory sum of situational tactical steps and attention focused on the development of bilateral relations, as has been the case so often in post-Soviet history?

It stands to reason that the crisis has affected Russia's economic opportunities within the post-Soviet expanse. The country has been burdened by a multitude of domestic problems (the higher budget deficit, cutback in foreign trade revenue, disproportional development of the regions, reduction in the number of donor regions, growing difficulties in relations between the center and the federation constituencies, changes in the political landscape, intensification of oppositional and protest moods, and so on). But all the same, in our opinion, despite the difficulties generated by the world crisis, the Russian Federation will continue to steer a course toward restoring its position among the leading nations of the world and this must be reckoned with. Russia will make an economic comeback, raise its international significance, and build up its military-strategic potential much faster than some politicians and experts are inclined to believe. So there is no point in prematurely forecasting a decrease in Russia's role in the world and in the post-Soviet expanse.

Russia has been searching long and hard for its own geopolitical identity. Through trial and error, it is trying to find the right tone in its relations with different countries and regions of the world, including Central Asia, frequently making mistakes along the way (including with respect to the frozen conflicts and energy security, to name a few). This is arousing very natural caution since any “rash” move it makes with respect to the states of the post-Soviet expanse plucks at the extremely delicate and sensitive strings of historical memory. If Russia has too harsh a reaction to a particular event—puts pressure on its allies, shows an excessive desire to flex its military muscles, or applies economic levers of influence against a particular state—many Central Asian experts will inevitably project this onto their own region.

It is not always possible to find a single system-forming origin in Russia's Central Asian strategy either. Although it may make significant strides forward in its relations with a particular state, Moscow is unable to achieve significant progress in its relations with the region as a whole. Large-scale contracts with one state mean losses in relations with others.¹ Water facilities in Tajikistan

¹ See: “Prichina otkaza Uzbekistana ot uchastia v ODKB veroiatno kroetsia v okazanii Rossiei podderzhki Kyrgyzstanu i Tadzhiistanu v stroitel'stve GES,” by S. Ezhkov, available at [<http://www.ca-news.org/print/118471>].

and Kyrgyzstan are a good case in point.² Year after year the drama over the price of natural gas produced by the Central Asian states continues.³ Whereby the interests of large Russian corporations are not always justifiably identified with Russia's interests as a state (this became particularly evident during the recent conflict between Turkmenistan and Gazprom with respect to the gas pipeline explosion).⁴

On the whole, in our opinion, Russia has not quite achieved a strategic vision of its relations with the Central Asian states. Moscow is still unable to develop a unified and integrated approach to the region. Instead of concentrating on one chess game it is playing five at once. This has its advantages up to a certain point, but in the end it will lead to greater contradictions with partners. In this respect, the Kremlin's somewhat skeptical attitude toward the integration processes in Central Asia and its unwillingness to talk to the region as a whole do not appear particularly productive.

However, experience shows that the most positive dynamics in developing relations with Central Asia are achieved precisely by those states that encourage regional integration. We are sure that Russia's assistance in regional integration will only help to strengthen those projects Russia is directly involved in (the CIS, EurAsEC, Customs Union, the SCO). Central Asia's consolidation will ultimately be beneficial to Russia itself. But this will only be possible if its strategy acquires more distinct features and if Moscow trusts its partners and allies more. The old axiom that you can only lean on what is capable of resisting is true not only in physics, but also in international relations.

Recently, Russian policy on the international arena has begun acquiring softer forms. Dmitri Medvedev is resorting increasingly to the significant potential of "soft power," which is doubtlessly helping to enhance Russia's image and establish more productive relations with the other grandees of world politics, including the EU and U.S. If this trend continues, it will have a favorable influence on cooperation among the world powers in Central Asia and be beneficial to Central Asia. For example, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's recent statement to the effect that Russia is not claiming a monopoly in Central Asia and recognizes the interests of other world powers in the region was positively perceived by all the interested sides, including Kazakhstan.

As for Kazakh-Russian relations proper, both bilateral and multilateral, they have the most favorable prospects. The role of bilateral cooperation has become particularly dynamic in the context of the world crisis. Kazakhstan's and Russia's joint efforts in the economic sphere are having a favorable influence on the entire Eurasian expanse.

The experience accumulated by the two countries over the years of independence makes it possible to confidently talk about a strategic partnership between Astana and Moscow that covers almost all the most important spheres—from problems of global and regional security to cooperation in the military-political and energy spheres,⁵ as well as in high technology.

Both the intensive political dialogue between their leaders and the successful development of economic trade relations, as well as the greater interaction at the level of civil society, show the high level of mutual understanding between the countries. It can be confidently said that Kazakhstan and Russia have become equal strategic partners in practice.

² See: "Uzbekistan: zaiavlena ofitsial'naia pozitsiia po voprosu stroitel'stva novykh GES," available at [<http://www.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=11690&print=1>].

³ See: A. Grivach, "Tsena sredneaziatskogo partnerstva," available at [<http://www.vremya.ru/print/227122.html>].

⁴ See: D. Trilling, "Turkmenistan: truboprovodnyy spor s Kremlem prevrashechaetsia v politicheskuiu proverku na prochnost'," available at [<http://www.inosmi.ru/translation/248528.html>].

⁵ See: "Mazhilis odobril ratifikatsiiu soglashiia mezhdru pravitel'stvami RK, RF i Turkmenistana o sotrudnichestve v stroitel'stve Prikaspiiskogo gazoprovoda (s dopolnieniem)," available at [<http://www.kt.kz/print.php?lang=rus&uin=1133167994>].

Kazakhstan and Chinese Interests in the Region

China has been one of Central Asia's most important partners from the very beginning, which is very understandable keeping in mind their geographical proximity, similar mindset, and traditionally close economic and cultural ties. At the same time, two important circumstances are making this partnership especially pertinent and mutually advantageous.

- First, China is currently moving up to a higher rung in the world hierarchy. The PRC is becoming a global power with a very strong influence on all the political and economic processes in the contemporary world.
- Second, in the context of the world crisis, China is among the few states that has not only avoided recession but also retained fairly high GDP growth rates. The PRC was able to shift the accents in its economic development on time and is striving to compensate for the drop in exports by expanding its internal market.
- Third, China has significant international reserves, which allow it to carry out large-scale operations in crisis conditions aimed at acquiring both natural resources and the shares of foreign enterprises.⁶ It is essentially investing in its geopolitical future. When the world recovers from the crisis (and China will be one of the first to overcome today's difficulties), Beijing will have everything it needs for another economic and technological breakthrough, and the yuan will possibly become one of the world reserve currencies.⁷

Central Asia and Kazakhstan cannot ignore these important facts. Moreover, they simply have to make use of them in their own national interests. China's fortification is a sustainable and long-term trend, so cooperation with it can only be to Kazakhstan's advantage, particularly if we keep in mind the complementariness of the two countries' economies.

The desire of some politicians and experts to evaluate the intensification of Kazakh-Chinese relations in the traditional terms of "zero-sum game" is entirely understandable. They interpret the rapprochement of the two countries either as Astana's "distancing" from Moscow toward Beijing,⁸ or as Kazakhstan's striving to avoid excessive pressure from Washington,⁹ etc.

Kazakhstan is acting very pragmatically. It is not losing sight of the general context of what is going on in the world. All the global and regional players are actively cooperating with China. Other countries, including Iran and the RF, are also signing contracts for the delivery of energy resources to China.¹⁰ For example, Kazakhstan fully understands China granting Russia a loan of 25 billion dollars. On the whole, stronger cooperation among the SCO member states in the context of the world crisis is an exclusively positive phenomenon.

⁶ See: "Ministerstvo kormertsii: zakupki za rubezhom stanut obychnoi deiatel'nostiu," available at [<http://russian.people.com.cn/31518/6639210.html>].

⁷ See: S. Tarasov, "Iuan' gotovitsia pokorit' mir," available at [<http://www.stoletie.ru/print.php?printid=14592>].

⁸ See: "Ne dozhdavshis' Rossii, Kazakhstan producaetsia Kitaiu," available at [<http://svpressa.ru/issue/news.php?id=7386>].

⁹ See: "Kitai ne dast Kazakhtanu stat' amerikanskoi marionetkoi v regione," available at [<http://cvrazia.org/news/8107>].

¹⁰ See: "Kitaiskie eksperty: Sotrudnichestvo KNR i Rossii v sfere energetiki priobrela politicheskii smysl," available at [<http://www.regnum.ru/news/1154849.html>].

Kazakhstan and the U.S.'s Central Asian Strategy

The U.S. traditionally occupies an important place in Kazakhstan's foreign policy priorities. This stands to reason, since despite all the changes in the world balance of forces the United States will long continue to be the most powerful nation in all respects, a nation with global influence and with which all of today's states will have to reckon.

Barack Obama's ascent to power has brought up many questions, hopes, and expectations not only in the U.S., but also throughout the world regarding the content and general tone of America's foreign policy. It should be noted that Obama's first 100 days at the helm created a rather favorable impression since the new president is showing his adherence in practice to searching for diplomatic solutions to the most complicated problems of international affairs, as well as a willingness for compromise.

Central Asia was not a very easy region for the former American administration during its eight years in power. The desire to fight international terrorism and achieve stabilization in Afghanistan, as well as the interest in gaining access to natural resources often contradicted with advancing democracy in Central Asia. This was expressed in the events around Andijan and the subsequent withdrawal of the American military base from Uzbekistan. The end of 2008 and first half of 2009 were marked by discussions about the withdrawal of the American base from Kyrgyzstan. Washington's recent statement to the effect that after it pulled out of Manas the U.S. would not create a new base in Central Asia seemed to put the final end to this story and open a new page in relations with the region.¹¹

Of course, at present many questions concerning the new American administration's strategy in Central Asia have not been answered. We still cannot say with certainty whether the concept of Greater Central Asia, which was unofficially upheld by the George Bush Jr. administration, will remain in force. It is also difficult to say whether Barack Obama's new policy in Afghanistan will become an integral part of this concept. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan is interested in Afghanistan's rapid stabilization and in establishing strategic cooperation between NATO and CSTO and NATO and SCO.

The U.S. has been and still is conducting an active policy in energy security, which directly affects Central Asia and the Caspian Region. Washington is insistently advancing the idea of diversifying export routes and opposing any monopoly in this sphere. It must be admitted that Gazprom agreed to calculate the prices for Central Asian natural gas in keeping with the European formula, for which the U.S. can take some of the credit. But excessive politicization of energy security issues sometimes stoked up the tension in issues that require moderate approaches. In this respect, the recent appointment of Richard Morningstar as U.S. Special Envoy for Eurasian Energy was a positive signal for all the sides concerned.¹²

Further development of Central Asia and Kazakhstan largely depends on resolving the problem of Iran's energy program. Kazakhstan, which has large supplies of uranium (around 20% of the total world reserves) and has voluntarily declared itself a non-nuclear state, is upholding a principled position in this issue. Astana recognized Iran's right to the peaceful atom and is in favor of a peaceful

¹¹ See: A. Dubnov, "Ekho 'perezagruzki' v Tsentral'noi Azii," available at [<http://www.vremya.ru/print/227723.html>].

¹² See: "Richard Mornignstar stanet osnovnym sovetnikom Hillary Clinton po voprosam Evrazii," available at [<http://regnum.ru/news/1153845.html>].

solution to all problems relating to its nuclear program. In this respect, the Obama administration reacted rather positively to the idea of creating a nuclear fuel bank on Kazakhstan's territory.¹³

The U.S. is an important partner of Kazakhstan in investment cooperation (the total amount of American investments in the Kazakh economy has already topped 15 billion dollars), in the fuel and energy complex, and in high technology. In this respect, the Kazakh-American initiative to establish state-private partnership could play an important role.

On the whole, Astana intends to continue pursuing friendly and constructive relations with Washington and develop a dialogue in all the main areas of cooperation—political, economic, and military—as well as in security and the advance of democracy. Kazakhstan will also strive to remain the U.S.'s key partner in Central Asia in the future. In this respect, it highly values the assistance Washington is rendering to the integration processes in the region.

Kazakhstan and EU Strategy in Central Asia

The European Union has become more active in Central Asia in the past few years. The peak of the EU's relations with the region came during Germany's chairmanship, under which a document entitled "The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership" for 2007-2013 was drawn up and adopted. According to this document, the EU's main goals in the region include ensuring stability and security of the Central Asian countries, helping to reduce poverty and raise the standard of living of its population, and developing cooperation between the European Union and the regional states.

Kazakhstan was positively inclined toward this strategy. Its foreign policy departments in all of the Central Asian countries took part in preparing and coordinating this document. Kazakhstan is particularly interested in the sections of the strategy that deal with encouraging Central Asia's integration into the world economy, including by means of the WTO's mechanisms, supporting regional trade, helping to resolve environmental and water problems, and strengthening the energy and transport ties between the EU and the region. So Astana has been trying to reinforce the nascent positive trends in the EU's policy, particularly under France's chairmanship.

Kazakhstan reacted to the EU's Central Asian strategy by adopting the "Path to Europe" state program in 2008. This program envisages:

- developing and intensifying cooperation with the European countries in all vectors, including political, economic, and social;
- interaction in the sphere of security and humanitarian cooperation;
- improving Kazakhstan's institutional and legal base using positive European experience, and so on.

Within the framework of this program, Astana succeeded in greatly stepping up its relations both with Western and with Central and Eastern European states. In so doing, by upholding the multi-vector principle, Kazakhstan was able not only to raise its relations with the EU to a new level as a global player, but also retain a reasonable balance in relations with Russia, China, and the U.S.

¹³ See: K. Esbergen, "Astana snova primeriaet na sebja rol' geopoliticheskogo igroka," available at [<http://rus.azattyq.org/articleprintview/1606655.html>].

Unfortunately, at present, it must be said that the European Union's activity in the Central Asian vector has subsided somewhat. And there are reasons for this.

- First, the EU, like the other global actors, is experiencing great economic difficulties caused by the world financial crisis. In this respect it cannot fully realize the intentions set forth in the Strategy for 2007-2013.
- Second, the EU is currently headed by the Czech Republic, which is experiencing an internal political crisis and does not enjoy enough economic and political clout to have a significant impact on the policy of United Europe in Central Asia. We will remind you that the Czech president is "Euro skeptic" V. Klaus, while M. Topolánek's "Euro optimistic" government was recently given a vote of no confidence in the country's parliament. In addition, the Czech Republic ranks only 16th in the EU in terms of GDP, has still not entered the Euro zone, and is experiencing certain economic difficulties.
- Third, in 2008 and at the beginning of 2009, the European Union was forced to undertake extraordinary measures with respect to the events in the Caucasus, Middle East, and the gas war between Russia and Ukraine.

So both objective and subjective factors are hindering the development of cooperation between the EU and Central Asia to a certain extent, which European representatives are openly talking about. Admittedly, in March-April 2009 the European Union did attempt to draw attention to itself in the region. In particular, P. Morel, its special representative for the Central Asian countries, said that he was concerned about the unequal distribution of water resources in Central Asia and recommended that the region's states re-examine their attitude toward the water problem.¹⁴ The signing by Germany's RWE and Turkmenistan of a memorandum on cooperation, which makes it possible to talk about a new round in the struggle for Caspian energy resources, did not go unnoticed either.¹⁵

Kazakhstan is extremely interested in the EU remaining Central Asia's main partner since this will not only promote the region's development, but will also make it possible to retain a reasonable balance of forces there. In addition, cooperation with the EU is extremely important for Kazakhstan due to its upcoming chairmanship in the OSCE in 2010. Astana is willing to examine any issues that are important to the members of this organization, including the Central Asian states. While keeping its own national interests in mind, Kazakhstan will do everything it can to make the OSCE an area of peace, stability, and mutual understanding.

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Recognizing its special role in Central Asia and in Eurasia as a whole, Kazakhstan has never been a country to play an underpart, quietly observing the competition among the world nations in the region from the wings. During all the years of its independence, it has conducted a policy aimed at integration of the region, its unification in the face of the global challenges and threats, and its transformation into a united geopolitical entity. The Union of Central Asian States Kazakhstan offered its regional neighbors is another confirmation of this.

At the same time, Astana is not hiding its long-term geopolitical and geo-economic ambitions. There can be no doubt that the country is interested in retaining its role of regional leader, outstripping

¹⁴ See: V. Panfilova, "Brissel' protiv ogromnykh plotin," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 20 April, 2009.

¹⁵ See: A. Grivach, "V obkhod Rossii. Turkmenistan podpisal s nemetskoii RWE memorandum o sotrudnichestve," available at [<http://www.vremya.ru/print/227454.html>].

its neighbors in all the main parameters of national might. It intends to reach the top rungs of the world hierarchy and gradually become a member of the most influential associations.

Kazakhstan is not only striving to successfully integrate into world economic relations, but is also actively participating in forming the agenda of the post-crisis world. In this respect, it is exerting efforts to become one of the most competitive countries of the world and possibly join the “Asian twenty.” Finally, it will continue to promote the idea of creating a regional Asian currency and supra-national world currency.

Can these and other problems be effectively resolved without active and constructive cooperation with the key global players—Russia, China, the U.S., and the European Union? Of course, not. Recognizing this, Kazakhstan is trying to retain its status as a key strategic partner of the world nations in Central Asia in all the most important areas—political, investment, economic trade, energy, military-strategic, scientific-educational, and cultural.

By intensifying its cooperation with the world powers, Kazakhstan certainly hopes that the inevitable competition among the global players in Central Asia will not escalate into confrontation, but will act as a counterbalance to their active cooperation, primarily in regional security (including with respect to post-conflict rehabilitation in Afghanistan), as well as in the energy industry and transport communications.

In this respect, Kazakhstan is in favor of equal and mutually advantageous partnership between the various collective security and cooperation organizations—the CSTO and NATO, the SCO and NATO, the SCO and EurAsEC. It is trying to create an atmosphere in the region whereby the success of one global player cannot be interpreted as the failure of the other. Moreover, Kazakhstan is against any one global player having excessive domination in Central Asia, since this would hinder realization of the region’s geopolitical and geo-economic potential.

The world nations must realize that all the Central Asian states (including the economically weakest) have already had a taste of freedom and independence. Not understanding this simple truth creates certain difficulties for the world powers themselves, since they are not always able to make an adequate assessment of certain steps taken by the Central Asian leaders. For example, when investing large amounts of money in the economy of the regional states and drawing corresponding benefit from this, the world powers are often inclined to expect that their partners will also show geopolitical loyalty and support certain steps on the world arena. So it stands to reason that the global players sometimes perceive the attempts of the regional elites to ensure the national interests of their own countries as much as possible as being inconsistent¹⁶ or even as their ingratitude.¹⁷

But the countries of the region no longer want to be mere cogs in the wheel of the geopolitical projects advanced by the global players, even if their implementation promises significant economic and other dividends. So at the expense of making certain tactical and strategic mistakes, the Central Asian states will strive to carry out (regardless of the specific terminology) the same multi-vector policy, balancing out some of the world powers against others, global players against regional, and geographically nearby states against distant ones.

In this respect it should be kept in mind that for Central Asia and Kazakhstan the outside world is not limited to the world nations. The role of other countries is gradually strengthening—India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Turkey, the Middle Eastern states, Latin America, and so on. This will make it possible to diversify foreign policy in the foreseeable future and to some extent counterbalance the influence of the world nations in the region. This factor must be kept in mind. For Central

¹⁶ See: R. Fedoseev, “Uzbekistan povorachivaet na Zapad,” available at [www.vz.ru/politics/2009/4/15/276710.print.html].

¹⁷ See: “Ekspert: Rossia dolzhna napomnit’ Tsentral’noi Azii o svoem vklade v razvitie regiona,” available at [<http://www.regnum.ru/news/1151562.html>].

Asia it is a valuable geopolitical and geo-economic resource. So not one state, no matter how strong and influential it is, should cherish vain hopes about the prospect of gaining supremacy in the region—the controlling set of shares will always be held by the Central Asian countries.

Of course, Kazakhstan clearly recognizes the seriousness of the Central Asian region's problems (water, ethno-territorial, and others), but it is sure that all of these questions can be resolved by manifesting political will. Moreover, there is every reason to believe that the states of the region will gradually come to understand the need for accelerating integration, within the framework of which mutually acceptable compromises can be sought. In this respect, Kazakh politicians and experts believe that the arguments that Central Asia is almost threatened with collapse are much too categorical.¹⁸ As for the “insurmountable” contradictions, it is enough to recall how difficult and thorny the European path to integration was (and remains to this day).

On the whole, Kazakhstan is willing to continue steering a course toward a balanced, equal, and constructive dialogue with all the world and regional nations. It intends to integrate into world economic relations and occupy a worthy place in creating world order. While upholding its own national interests and the interests of Central Asia, Kazakhstan is also willing to take its share of the responsibility for the state of affairs in the region and the world as a whole.

¹⁸ See: A. Shmulevich, “Tsentral'naiia Azia i Kazakhstan: tochki griadushchego raspada,” available at [<http://www.apn.ru/publications/print21535.htm>].