

# INCREASING ROLE OF KAZAKHSTAN IN GLOBAL POLITICS

Burak Çalışkan



**İNSAMER**

İHH İNSANİ VE SOSYAL ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ  
IHH HUMANITARIAN AND SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTER  
مركز البحوث الإنسانية و الاجتماعية

To cite this article: Çalışkan, Burak. "Increasing Role of Kazakhstan in Global Politics", INSAMER, 06.05.2020.



Analysis

After hosting the negotiations between Iran and P5+1 countries and acting as the mediator in the resulting political conflict after the warplane crisis between Russia and Turkey, Kazakhstan managed to host the Astana negotiations to end the Syrian war. President Nursultan Nazarbayev has turned Kazakhstan into the center of Asian diplomacy. He built intimate relations with Russia's Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping and paid a critical visit to the United States in January 2018. All these developments indicate an increasingly strategic role of Kazakhstan in global affairs.

The increasing role of Kazakhstan - who is also rich in petroleum and natural gas resources - in international relations recently manifested itself when Kazakhstan became a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for 2017-2018. Kazakhstan's recent success in international relations is realized through

its initiatives in solving the country's main problems after it's independence.

After Kazakhstan gained its independence following the collapse of the the Soviet Union, it was faced with three main problems. First, the ethnic/demographic fabric of the country was too heterogeneous. According to the figures of 1989, 39.7% of the population was made of Kazakhs, while Russians constituted 37.8% of it. The rest of the population was made of mostly Belarusians, Germans, and Ukrainians, which meant that half of the country's population was European. The Russian population - centered mainly on the northern region of the country - had the potential of launching a process that could connect the region to Russia but also posed vulnerable position to civil war, as Armenian minority in Azerbaijan did.

Second, Kazakhstan's economy depended heavily on Russia in terms of finance and industry.



**İNSAMER**  
İHH İNSANİ VE SOSYAL ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ  
IHH HUMANITARIAN AND SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTER  
مركز البحوث الإنسانية و الاجتماعية

Even in 1991, 43% of the country's industry was under the direct control of Moscow. The production facilities were so much intertwined with the Russian market. This convoluted structure caused an absolute dependence on Russian economy in Kazakhstan's post-independence foreign trade.

Third, Kazakhstan's nuclear/military facilities in certain regions were controlled by Russia. Since Kazakhstan retained its nuclear testing area in Semipalatinsk, more than a thousand rockets with nuclear warheads were stationed in Baikonur spaceport; making the Kazakh administration felt Russian pressure in earnest.

These three fundamental problems hampered Kazakhstan's independent acts regarding socio-economic decisions. The Russian population centered on the northern part of the country and its economic dependency from Russia prompted Nazarbayev to take a realistic stance on his policies. For this reason, Nazarbayev strived for bringing about an independent state structure, while trying to stem any disagreement with neither Russia nor Kazakhstan's Russian residents. But solving the three problems proved to be key to allow independent acts in Kazakhstan's foreign affairs. For this reason, Kazakhstan had to be involved Russia's regional cooperation initiatives.

The demographic structure of Kazakhstan has undergone some changes through certain policies in time. After the independence, a lot of Kazakhs from other countries, notably Mongolia, returned to their homeland and they were settled in northern Kazakhstan. Russians in Kazakhstan, however, fled to Russia in their hundreds. The birth rate of Kazakhs was much higher than that of Russians and this also affected the demographic structural change of the country. Kazakhstan's population is currently

19.1 million, with Kazakhs making up 68% of it and Russians 19.3%. Kazakhs becoming the majority in Kazakhstan, and the percentage of Russian population decreasing in half (compared to 1990 figures) gave the Kazakh administration an upper hand.

Realizing the fact that its policies would not so much decide the fate of its nuclear facilities and rockets, Kazakhstan conceded to transfer them to Russia in 1993 and this process was completed in 1995. Russian bases scattered in Kazakhstan were rented to Russia by deals struck at different times. With the following agreements, facilities in Kazakhstan were made the center for Russia's weapon's testing. It is known that Russia has seven different military facilities in different regions of Kazakhstan.

The economy has been the most prioritized field since the country gained its independence. Given Kazakhstan's rich petroleum and natural gas resources, Nazarbayev made an effort to improve the industry. However, Kazakhstan's petroleum and

natural gas were delivered through Russia to Europe, which created yet another challenge. In the early 90's, although Moscow reacted to economic initiatives of Western countries particularly the United States, both Western countries and China consolidated their presence further in Kazakhstan's economy at the expense of Moscow. China especially has been increasingly engaging in Kazakhstan's petroleum and natural gas sector since 1997. Pipelines were built to deliver Kazakhstan's energy resources to the Chinese market. Today it is estimated that the shares of Chinese companies in Kazakhstan energy market has reached 25% and it would increase further with time.

In addition to these, important advancements were enjoyed in the Silk Road project Xi Jinping announced to the world in his speech in

*Nominated for  
the Nobel Peace  
Prize in 2010,  
Nazarbayev was  
perceived as  
a conciliatory  
leader for his  
multidimensional  
policy in the  
international  
arena.*

Kazakhstan in 2013. A deal tagged 30 million dollars signed between China and Kazakhstan signaled the relevance of Kazakhstan in the project. Besides China, Kazakhstan established strong trade relations with Western countries like Italy, the Netherlands and Switzerland; and these relationships decreased Kazakhstan's dependency on Russia considerably.

Though Nazarbayev's relations with Russia always took precedence over his relations with other countries, he tried to conduct a multidimensional foreign policy. For the sake of balancing Russian influence over the country, Kazakhstan improved its relations with regional powers like Turkey and Iran while maintaining its relations with China and the West in a proper way. Solving its post-independence main problems in certain degrees has allowed Kazakhstan to take essential steps both in domestic and foreign policy.

Further, nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, Nazarbayev was perceived as a conciliatory leader for his multidimensional policy in the international arena. He paved the way for Kazakhstan to host the negotiations on

uranium enrichment between Iran and P5+1 countries in Almaty. The negotiations between Russia, Iran, and Turkey that changed the course of the Syrian War were also held in Astana. Moreover, Nazarbayev interfered to help ease the tension between Russia and Turkey after the warplane crisis on 24 November 2015 by assuming a mediatory role. In the meantime, Kazakhstan hosted the Expo 2017 and Winter Olympics.

After 30 years ruling Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev resigned from his position as President of the Republic in March 2019. The world witnessed a first ever normal and peaceful transfer of powers in Central Asia. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev took office as the second president of Kazakhstan on 20 March 2019.

As a result, Kazakhstan now has good relations with Russia, the United States and China at the same time; and it is also an important ally for Turkey and Iran. In the global struggle called the 'new big game' by some, as Central Asia stands out, Kazakhstan is likely to have a very critical role in the region.