

The International Dimensions of Kazakhstan's Alphabet Shift

A Study of Kazakh Multi-Vectorism in the 2010s



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Abstract

The Kazakh language is currently undergoing a dramatic transformation after the 2017 announcement of a switch from Cyrillic to Latin characters. Furthermore, President Nursultan Nazarbayev effectively banned the Russian language from his cabinet in March 2018. Yet in Kazakhstan, only around 65% of the population speaks and understands Kazakh, while upwards of 90% use Russian as their primary language of communication, including the European Slavic population (Russians, Ukrainians and Byelorussians) which constitutes over one quarter of the whole. These moves could put the Russian-speaking population of Kazakhstan at a disadvantage. At a time when the Kremlin is become more assertive in its region and protective of ethnic Russians living abroad, this could have foreign political consequences for Astana. With this observation as its starting point, this thesis will explore the domestic and international dimensions of recent Kazakh language policy to come to an understanding as to why the policy was carried out. In doing so, it will also provide an up-to-date study of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy. It will be shown that three factors provided the main impetus for the policy: economic modernisation, in which the English language plays an ever greater role; the need for a stronger sense of national identity, in which links to other Turkic-speaking countries have become more important; and a greater distancing from Moscow, which involves removing the last few links to the Soviet Union.

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1. A Shift in Attitude

Introduction

At the beginning of March 2018, then President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev met with his Minister for Information and Communication, to whom he said that ‘the activities of the parliament and government should only be carried out in the state language’. The morning after, a meeting of parliament took place for the first time almost entirely in Kazakh – the state language – where before, both Russian and Kazakh were used frequently and interchangeably. The Minister for Education was the only one to say a few phrases in Russian and was subject to online attacks.¹ The Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, however, enshrines the equal use of Kazakh and Russian in all state organisations. Furthermore in Kazakhstan, only around 65% of the population speaks and understands Kazakh, while upwards of 90% understand Russian and use it as their primary language of communication. Russians, Ukrainians and Byelorussians constitute 24% of the population, only a quarter of whom can understand Kazakh. The backdrop to Nazarbayev’s ruling, carried out to ‘boost the status of the state language’, is a dramatic transformation of the Kazakh alphabet: a shift from Cyrillic to Latin characters. This shift is officially being undertaken as a response to globalisation and to push Kazakhstan into the 21st century, but is likely to have wide-reaching causes and effects on an international level, not least due to Moscow’s assertiveness and protection of its ethnic compatriots residing in the post-Soviet Russian-speaking world – the ‘near abroad’ or ‘*russkiy mir*’ – which transcends the state borders of the Russian Federation. This thesis will explore the wider international dimensions of the recent alphabet change and shift in attitude towards the Russian language in Kazakhstan, aiming to understand Nazarbayev’s motivations and provide an up-to-date study of the country’s foreign relations.

¹ ‘И вырвал русский ваш язык?’ [And did Russian pull out your tongue?], *Novaya Gazeta*, 7 March 2018. <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/03/05/75708-i-vyrval-russkiy-vash-yazyk>; ‘Lost in translation? Kazakh leader bans cabinet from speaking Russian.’ *Reuters*, 27 February 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kazakhstan-language/lost-in-translation-kazakh-leader-bans-cabinet-from-speaking-russian-idUSKCN1GB1EJ>

Kazakhstan's foreign relations began with its independence in 1991. The country was forced to craft a foreign policy *ab initio* and, in doing so, had to respond to certain unavoidable factors such as a fragile economic situation, an ethnically diverse society, a powerful and unignorable former 'master' in the Russian Federation to the north, a wealth of natural resources, a landlocked geographical position in the neighbourhood of two large powers, and its Soviet legacy.² Nazarbayev was the country's first president, leading from 1991 to 2019, and was instrumental in the development of foreign and domestic policy. His key role is laid out in the 1995 constitution, which states: "The President of the Republic of Kazakhstan shall be the head of state, its highest official determining the main directions of the domestic and foreign policy of the state and representing Kazakhstan within the country and in international relations".³ A 'multi-vector' policy has emerged, meaning that Kazakhstan does not follow a strictly ideological foreign policy, but rather a pragmatic one based on strong relations with multiple and sometimes seemingly contradictory partners.⁴ Russia is one of the key vectors, along with China and the West, comprising the United States, European Union (EU) and certain supranational organisations, such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), of which Kazakhstan is a member. Turkey and Central Asia have also emerged recently as increasingly important vectors of Kazakh foreign policy.

Since independence, Kazakhstan has also had to create some form of identity from scratch, of which the main source in Central Asia, according to Kemal H. Karpat,

² See Nazarbayev, Nursultan (1992). 'Стратегия становления и развития Казахстана как суверенного государства', *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*. https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30006969#pos=0:103; Martha Brill Olcott (1996), *Central Asia's New States: Independence, Foreign Policy, and Regional Security*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press); Olivier Roy (2000), *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations*, (London, I.B. Tauris); Cummings, Sally (2003). 'Eurasian bridge or murky waters between east and west? Ideas, identity and output in Kazakhstan's foreign policy.' *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 19:3, pp. 139-155; Hanks, Reuel R. (2009). "Multi-vector politics" and Kazakhstan's emerging role as a geo-strategic player in Central Asia.' *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*. 11:3, pp. 257-267; Avinoam Idan & Brenda Shaffer (2011), 'The Foreign Policies of Post-Soviet Landlocked States,' *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 27:3, pp. 241-268; Michael Clarke, 'Kazakhstan's Multi-vector Foreign Policy: Diminishing Returns in an Era of Great Power "Pivots"?' *The Asan Forum*, 9 April 2015

³ Статья 40.1, Конституция республики Казахстан [Article 40.1, Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan]. http://www.akorda.kz/ru/official_documents/constitution, accessed 28 February 2019.

⁴ This is an agreed-upon definition throughout the literature, even when authors may disagree in other areas. See, for example, Cummings (2003), 'Eurasian bridge'; Hanks (2009), 'Multi-vector politics'; Olcott (1996), *Central Asia's New States*

has become a linguistic identity, or ‘ethnicity based on language’.⁵ This was heavily influenced by Soviet nationality policy which shall be discussed in more depth in Chapter 2. Suffice it to say, after decades of language policy dictated by the Soviet Union, Nazarbayev pursued policies designed to boost the status of the Kazakh language in the country. Until now, these have never actively been to the detriment of the Russian language in Kazakhstan; they have certainly been pro-Kazakh but not anti-Russian. However, 2017 and 2018 brought with them an apparent shift in attitude of the Kazakh political elite towards the Russian language. The abandonment of Cyrillic and the *de facto* expulsion of the Russian language from the parliament, if not the entire government, represent significant developments and are certainly interpreted as anti-Russian by the Russian media. Although the Kremlin itself abstained from comment, pro-government tabloid *Moskovskij Komsomolets* warned in no uncertain terms that changing the alphabet would spark the ‘degradation’ of Kazakhstan. The equally pro-government *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* took a similar stance and published an article entitled ‘Kazakhstan’s transition to Latin is a signal to Russia’, which also contained a video mocking the ‘stupidity’ of transliterating certain words from Cyrillic to Latin. Even the more anti-establishment *Novaya Gazeta* was critical and provided a mouthpiece for Kazakh critics – ‘It’s all just nonsense!’ one said.⁶

For the past century, Russians have either held an ethnic majority or represented a significant ethnic minority in Kazakhstan, which has also been home to a plethora of other national minorities. Milton J. Esman argues that the greater the degree of ethnic pluralism, the more potentially contentious the issue of language policy: ‘There are few issues, aside from religion, that can mobilise and sustain such passion as the status of

⁵ Karpat, Kemal, H. (1995b). ‘The Sociopolitical Environment Conditioning the Foreign Policy of the Central Asian States,’ in Dawisha, Adeed & Dawisha, Karen (eds.) (1995). *The Making of Foreign Policy in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*. (New York: M.E. Sharpe), p. 183

⁶ ‘Переход Казахстана на латиницу – это сигнал для России’ [Kazakhstan’s transition to Latin is a signal to Russia], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 13 April 2017, http://www.ng.ru/cis/2017-04-13/1_6973_kazahstan.html; ‘Эксперт: переводом казахского алфавита на латиницу Назарбаев запустит деградацию Казахстана’ [Expert: With the transition of the Kazakh alphabet to Latin, Nazarbayev will initiate the degradation of Kazakhstan], *Moskovskij Komsomolets*, 12 April 2017, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2017/04/12/ekspert-perevodom-kazakhskogo-alfavita-na-latinicu-nazarbaev-zapustit-degradaciyu-kazahstana.html>; ‘И вырвал русский ваш язык?’ [And did Russian pull out your tongue?], *Novaya Gazeta*, 7 March 2018. Importantly, the Russian press can never express ideas that are too far from those of the regime. They are either censored by the government or exercise extensive self-censorship. The newspaper most critical of the regime, *Novaya Gazeta*, has seen six of its journalists murdered since 2001.

language because it is so central to collective identity.’⁷ For this reason, these recent language policy changes are likely to be the source of domestic controversy. As Chapter 2 will reveal, Kazakhstan’s domestic politics and affairs are heavily intertwined with its international relations, which means that the roots of language policy, as well as the effects thereof, extend into the international arena.

Over the years, various scholars have expressed the notion that it would be unthinkable for Astana to pursue an anti-Russian policy, as it remains both wary of antagonising the Kremlin and aware that a cooperative relationship with Moscow can pay economic and security dividends.⁸ And indeed, after a rocky start from the collapse of the USSR until around 1994, relations have remained positive between the two nations, both economically and politically, although Nazarbayev himself said as late as 2009 that ‘it is very dangerous to insult Russia’, suggesting that a wariness remained in the background of the two countries’ relationship.⁹ The recent policies carried out in Kazakhstan nevertheless suggest a shift in Kazakh-Russian relations, from one or both sides. With this observation as its starting point, this thesis will attempt to answer the following question: Why, after almost three decades of cooperative political relations with Russia, has Kazakhstan begun carrying out some seemingly anti-Russian policies? The present chapter will first outline the methodology of the research to be carried out, followed by a brief theoretical foundation for certain aspects of the research. Chapter 2 will provide a historiography of the key developments and academic voices on Kazakh foreign policy. Here, the factors which make up the backbone of the thesis will also be introduced. These factors, which represent the key motivations – internal and external – behind Kazakhstan’s pursuit of its foreign relations since 1991, are: ethnic demographics, economic interests, geography, and regime legitimation. The ensuing chapters will consist of an analysis of relevant aspects of Kazakhstan’s recent domestic politics and foreign relations, bringing the factors up to date. This will be carried out in

⁷ Esman, Milton J. (1992). ‘The State and Language Policy,’ *International Political Science Review*, 13:4, p. 382

⁸ See Olcott (1996), *Central Asia’s New States*, p. 59; Anderson, John (1997). *The International Politics of Central Asia*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 79; Roy (2000), *The New Central Asia*, pp. 134-35

⁹ US Embassy Astana. ‘Kazakhstan: Nazarbayev on Afghanistan, Iran, Russia, Relations with United States.’ WikiLeaks Cable: 09ASTANA557_a, 11 March 2009. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09ASTANA557_a.html

search of changes or continuities that can help to understand Nazarbayev's recent language policies.

With changes in language policy as its backdrop, this research hopes to provide an up-to-date study of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy relations with Russia, China, Central Asia and the West and the (geo)political and economic issues that drive these relationships. It aims to understand why, after its apparent heyday of the late 2000s, many scholars and commentators have argued that multi-vectorism may be becoming unsustainable, and what led Nazarbayev to take such drastic policies against the Russian language in Kazakhstan. It will fill a recent gap in the literature which has not yet sufficiently responded to the language policy changes in Kazakhstan within the wider context of its multi-vector foreign policy and how this points to shifts in its domestic and foreign policies. It will be shown that, while Russia and China remain the inevitable key players in Kazakhstan's foreign economic relations, political relations with these great powers may be becoming less desirable; how Kazakhstan can and does respond to this situation will be explored in detail. The EU and countries in the Turkic-speaking world have come to the fore as groups that Astana wants to be politically, economically and culturally associated with, particularly in the context of Washington's withdrawal from the region and Moscow's aggressive tactics in the post-Soviet space.

1.1. *Methodology*

Although the starting point of this research is language policy, which is an inherently domestic issue, there are obvious international implications. As will be explained in more detail later, Russia has historically seen itself as the protector of ethnic Russians abroad, and continues to do so. In infringing upon the rights of ethnic Russians by banning Russian in parliament, i.e. excluding the majority of Russians who do not know Kazakh, Nazarbayev risks a backlash from the Kremlin. The alphabet shift could also point towards (the desire for) closer relationships with Western countries who largely use the Latin script. Thus, the link between language policy and foreign relations can be drawn; it consequently becomes relevant to examine the factors motivating

Kazakhstan's foreign relations to look for recent changes that could have allowed for such shifts in language policy.

The research for this thesis will be carried out in two stages. The first stage will utilise primary sources from the 1990s and academic literature to identify and explore the motivating factors behind Kazakh foreign policy. The primary sources will include the 'Strategy for the Formation and Development of Kazakhstan as a Sovereign State' written by Nazarbayev in 1992 in which he lays out the plan for the integration of Kazakhstan into the international arena and the factors the country must address in its new state of independence, and the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan.¹⁰ Nazarbayev's personal views on various matters are elucidated in a number of books penned over the course of his presidency, as well as intermittent articles in *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, a government-sponsored newspaper, which serve as quasi-addresses to the nation.¹¹ These become important temporal indicators of the perceived position of Kazakhstan both domestically and internationally, although they do tend to glorify successes and omit negatives, and so must be taken with a pinch of salt. In the 1990s and into the early 2000s, a flurry of academic literature was written on 'Central Asia's New States' or the 'New States of Eurasia'. These new countries were of great academic interest and provided compelling case studies. However, around 2010, this interest seems to dry up, and less and less is being written about Kazakhstan, Central Asia and the wider region. In terms of the present research, this early interest in Central Asia comes as both a blessing and a curse. Positively, it provides a plethora of persuasive analysis concerning foreign policy formation; works such as Dewisha & Dewisha's (1995) *The Making of Foreign Policy in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, Olcott's (1996) *Central Asia's New States: Independence, Foreign Policy, and Regional Security*, and Anderson's (1997) *The International Politics of Central Asia* contain detailed studies of the early development of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan,

¹⁰ Nazarbayev (1992), 'Strategy for the formation and development of Kazakhstan as a sovereign state'; Конституция республики Казахстан [Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan], *Akorda*. http://www.akorda.kz/ru/official_documents/constitution

¹¹ A selection of written works by Nazarbayev including his books and articles is available online via <http://personal.akorda.kz/ru/category/knigi>

Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.¹² But this very breadth limits the utility of these studies to research on one specific country. In all of these works, ambiguous statements referring to 'Central Asia' are routinely made. It therefore becomes difficult to know if a specific statement can be interpreted as relating to Kazakhstan, to another state, or to an unmentioned combination of states. 'Central Asia' is also defined differently by different authors, sometimes comprising just the five post-Soviet states, and other times including Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and/or Caucasian states. By way of example, the following quote comes from a chapter in Dewisha & Dewisha's study:

'The Central Asians view China and its enormous population as a far greater threat to their existence as an ethnic group and a state than Russia. [...] The potential territorial claims of China, however remote they may appear at this time, are a source of great anxiety throughout Central Asia and an unheralded but ever-present reason for the new republics to maintain friendly relations with Russia.'¹³

A glance at a map of the region (see Map 1 below) suggests that some Central Asian countries will react differently to both China and Russia's presence in the region. Kazakhstan borders Russia and China, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan only border China, and Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan border neither.

¹² Dawisha, Adeed & Dawisha, Karen (eds.) (1995). *The Making of Foreign Policy in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*. (New York: M.E. Sharpe); Olcott (1996), *Central Asia's New States*; Anderson (1997), *The International Politics of Central Asia*

¹³ Karpal (1995b), 'The Sociopolitical Environment,' p. 199



Map 1: Central Asia and the Caucasus.¹⁴

This simple fact has huge demographic and security implications which are left unsaid by the above quote. Such statements are unfortunately widespread in works on Central Asia. Hindsight shows us that these states developed divergently – economically, domestically, and in terms of their international relations – and it now appears somewhat reductive to have grouped them together as ‘post-Soviet Central Asia’ when all responded to different political, socio-economic and geographic conditions.¹⁵ Thankfully, there has also been a number of Kazakhstan-specific books and articles written, upon which this thesis will rely more heavily. The factors outlined were identified as common threads in works both on Central Asia and Kazakhstan.

The second stage of the research will pick up where the historiography leaves off. As mentioned, less and less ink is being spilled on Kazakhstan, the last notable study of foreign policy being Olcott’s (2010) *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise*, the majority of which was actually written in 2002; British journalist Joanna Lillis provided an immersive and detailed snapshot of domestic life in the country in 2018, focussing on

¹⁴ <http://www.geographicguide.net/asia/caucasus-map.htm>, accessed 10 June 2019

¹⁵ This thesis will attempt to avoid unnecessary comparison amongst Central Asian states, unless it proves analytically relevant to do so. Central Asia is understood as the five post-Soviet states in the region: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

the post-Soviet legacy and regime opposition. Cummings' (2011) *Sovereignty After Empire: Comparing the Middle East and Central Asia* and Malashenko's (2013) *The Fight for Influence: Russia in Central Asia*, while providing some interesting insight into Kazakhstan specifically, both fall unfortunately into the analytical trap outlined above and do not treat Kazakhstan as their main actor. In this stage, which will constitute the main body of the thesis, the factors outlined in the first stage will be isolated and reviewed over the last eight or so years. Here, the focus will shift to primary sources, in particular documents available through the Kazakh government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) websites.¹⁶ Information on these sites is available in Kazakh, Russian and English. The quality and amount of information available in English is significantly lower than in Kazakh or Russian, therefore the Russian content shall be examined.¹⁷ Through these documents and web pages, information regarding Nazarbayev and Foreign Minister Beibut Atamkulov's foreign visits, statements and speeches made by Nazarbayev to government and as part of certain events, and press releases from the MFA are available. Hyperbole is common within these documents, for example, the development strategy Kazakhstan-2050, states: 'Step by step, our society is nearing the highest standards of democracy and human rights.'¹⁸ This is clearly untrue: Freedom House gives Kazakhstan a freedom score of 22/100, i.e. 'not free',¹⁹ and human rights abuses are well-documented in Western media. Where the government fails to comment, newspaper articles will also be utilised. Anti-government press has largely been wiped out in Kazakhstan so the pro-regime bias must also be taken into account.²⁰ However, this can also be an advantage: newspapers cannot publish anything significantly at odds with the views of the regime; opinions given in pro-government journalism can sometimes be helpful in understanding the opinion of the regime itself if

¹⁶ Government: <http://www.akorda.kz/ru>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs: <http://mfa.gov.kz/ru>

¹⁷ For example, on the English version of the website (http://www.akorda.kz/en/official_documents/strategies_and_programs), the latest development strategy available for download is 'Kazakhstan-2030' from the year 1997, while the Russian version (http://www.akorda.kz/ru/official_documents/strategies_and_programs) includes both 'Kazakhstan-2050', announced in 2012, and the 'Nurly Zhol' development strategy from 2015.

¹⁸ Стратегия «Казахстан-2050» [Strategy 'Kazakhstan-2050'], *Akorda*.
http://www.akorda.kz/ru/official_documents/strategies_and_programs

¹⁹ 'Freedom in the World 2019: Kazakhstan,' *Freedom House*.
<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/kazakhstan>

²⁰ See Lillis, Joanna (2019). *Dark Shadows: Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan*. (London: I.B. Tauris), chapter 5

it does not give an official comment. The law states that at least 50% of all news media must be published in Kazakh,²¹ and here the researcher's own linguistic limitations will restrict the information that can be analysed. Quantitative data and statistics on economic and trade relations, accessed through sources such as the Observatory of Economic Complexity which presents data compiled by UN Comtrade, will also be utilised.²² Finally, independent commentary will be drawn upon. Most independent 'academic' writing on Kazakhstan in recent years is available through think tanks such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Such articles do point towards key developments in the country but can often be superficial, under-referenced and speculative, so they must be assessed critically based on further analysis of primary sources. In analysing these sources with relation to the factors historically underlying Kazakh foreign policy, the thesis hopes to identify changes (and continuities) that have taken place since 2010 which may serve to explain the policies undertaken by Kazakhstan in 2018.

In the evening of 19 March 2019, with the thesis still in its relatively early stages, Nazarbayev surprisingly announced his resignation; he would step down immediately and the Chairman of the Senate Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev would serve as the acting president until the end of the current term in 2020; a surprise election was announced for 9 June in which Tokayev easily secured victory. Tokayev has been a close compatriot of Nazarbayev since the early 1990s and it is unlikely that there will be significant policy changes with him in power; in his address to the nation, Nazarbayev said of Tokayev: 'Alongside me, he has been working since the first days of independence in Kazakhstan ... all programmes were developed and adopted with his participation. I believe that Tokayev is the person to whom can entrust the governance of Kazakhstan.'²³ Tokayev was a vocal supporter of the alphabet shift and has previously served as Nazarbayev's Foreign Minister and Prime Minister. To be sure, Nazarbayev will still be head of the

²¹ Статья 18, 'О языках в Республике Казахстан' [Article 18, On Languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan]. <http://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/Z970000151>

²² Kazakhstan, *Observatory of Economic Complexity*, <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/kaz/>. Data for Kazakhstan is available up to 2017.

²³ Nazarbayev, Nursultan. 'Нурсултан Назарбаев подал в отставку. Обращение к казахстанцам' [Nursultan Nazarbayev resigned. Speech to Kazakhs]. *YouTube*, 19 March 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9kuWdIL9wg>

Security Council and will remain leader of his political party, Nur Otan, ensuring his influence within government is not significantly diminished. Indeed, in his first speech to government, Tokayev spoke of the ongoing role of Nazarbayev in politics: 'An authoritative opinion of the Leader of the Nation will have particular, even priority importance in the development and adoption of strategic decisions [...] I plan to direct my knowledge and experience to ensuring the continuity of the strategic course of the Leader of the Nation.'²⁴ For these reasons, the methodology outlined (written largely before March 19) will remain unchanged, and documents released and events that take place under Tokayev's acting presidency, unless he unexpectedly proves to have significant ideological differences, will be analysed in the same camp as sources pertaining to Nazarbayev's presidency. On 23 March, Kazakhstan's capital Astana was renamed Nur-Sultan in honour of Nazarbayev. For simplicity's sake, however, this thesis will retain the use of Astana throughout.

1.2. *Theoretical Foundation*

While this thesis will not deal specifically with a certain theory, and will remain grounded in its case study, some aspects of foreign policy analysis (FPA), as developed by Snyder et al., Rosenau, and Sprout & Sprout in the 1950s and 60s, will serve as a theoretical foundation for certain parts of the analysis. These works have been regarded as the three paradigmatic texts of the discipline and although FPA's intrinsic theoretical debates will not be delved into, some of the analytical threads which permeate these works will be drawn upon. In her chapter in the Oxford University Press textbook on Foreign Policy, Valerie M. Hudson offers an evaluation of the commonalities between these three texts. She notes: 'The message of these three works was powerful: the particularities of the human beings making national foreign policy [are] vitally important to understanding foreign policy choice.'²⁵ Hermann & Kegley agreed, writing

²⁴ 'Выступление Президента Республики Казахстан Касым-Жомарта Токаева на совместном заседании палат Парламента' [Speech by President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev at the Joint Session of the Chambers of Parliament]. *MFA*, 20 March 2019.

<http://www.mfa.gov.kz/ru/content-view/vystuplenie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazahstan-kasym-zomarta-tokaeva-na-sovmestnom-zasedanii-palat-parlamenta>

²⁵ Smith, Steve, Hadfield, Amelia & Dunne, Tim (eds.) (2012). *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 17

that 'a compelling explanation [of foreign policy] cannot treat the decider exogenously'.²⁶ It is this aspect of FPA which will become the most useful for the present thesis. In a study of Kazakh foreign policy, we must naturally look to Nazarbayev as the 'decider', and his responses to internal and external pressures. Because he was the president of Kazakhstan for 28 years, Nazarbayev's views and opinions are well documented in books, articles, speeches, and policy concepts and documents, written by him, his observers, supporters and critics. This will make it somewhat easier to track any shifts in opinion that have taken place. In a 1980 study, Margaret G. Hermann concluded that the personal characteristics of leaders have a direct effect on their governments' foreign policy, which will become relevant in a more detailed profile of Nazarbayev and his foreign policy to be given in Chapter 2.²⁷

Another aspect of FPA agreed upon across the analytical stages is that the *process* of foreign policy-making is at least as important, if not more important, than the actual *output*.²⁸ For this thesis, it is not necessary to distinguish between foreign political intentions and actions, as it is the opinions and perceptions of the foreign policy elite in Kazakhstan which will become important to explain the shift in policy, rather than actual policy undertaken. 'Kazakh foreign policy' therefore, will be understood both as intentions and actions. And while the thesis will attempt to understand the Kazakh foreign policy elite's views on its foreign relations, it will not attempt to analyse the drivers behind foreign policy *towards* Kazakhstan, from Russia, China or the EU, for example. Thus 'foreign policy' towards Kazakhstan will be understood either as actions or *perceived* intentions, which may influence the thinking of the Kazakh foreign policy elite.

²⁶ Cited in Hudson, Valerie M. (2012). 'The History and Evolution of Foreign Policy Analysis,' in Smith, Hadfield & Dunne (eds.), *Foreign Policy*, p. 23

²⁷ Hermann, Margaret G. (1980). 'Explaining Foreign Policy Behaviour Using the Personal Characteristics of Political Leaders.' *International Studies Quarterly*. 24:1, p. 44

²⁸ Hudson (2012), 'The History and Evolution of Foreign Policy Analysis,' p. 17

2. A Balancing Act

Kazakhstan's Foreign Relations in the 1990s and 2000s

As in all post-Soviet states, the legacy of the USSR has shaped Kazakhstan's domestic and foreign policies from its independence to the present day. In its Central Asian context, Kazakhstan is the only country to share a border with Russia, which remains an important aspect of consideration in contemporary policy making. This also led Kazakhstan to become the most Russified of all Central Asian republics under the Soviet Union.²⁹ This chapter will firstly give an overview of Nazarbayev's foreign policy since independence, and secondly introduce the four broad factors that have motivated this policy. As mentioned, these are ethnic demography and national identity, Kazakhstan's economic interests, geography and regime legitimation. The legacy of the Soviet Union is an important backdrop to all of these factors which are, of course, not all-encompassing; however, they represent both the factors which were outlined by Nazarbayev in 1992, and those deemed most important and most frequently addressed in a synthesis of the academic literature.

2.1. *The Multi-Vector Nature of Kazakh Foreign Policy*

Kazakhstan announced its independence from the USSR on 16 December 1991 and began to be formally recognised 10 days later with the official dissolution of the Soviet Union. At this moment, Nazarbayev became the first President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Between 1989 and 1991 he had led the Communist Party of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (KSSR) as its First Chairman. His presidency has been defined by economic revival and industrialisation, authoritarian presidential rule, allegations of corruption and nepotism, ostensibly outstanding election results, harsh limitations on freedom of the press, a poor human rights record, and the successful integration of the country into the international system. Nazarbayev has written extensively on his plans for the country: a 1992 article in *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* and accompanying document

²⁹ Roy (2000), *The New Central Asia*, p. 191; for a detailed study of Soviet Russification policies in Central Asia, see Huttenbach, Henry R. (1990). *Soviet nationality policies: Ruling ethnic groups in the USSR*. (New York: Mansell)

entitled 'Strategy for the Establishment and Development of Kazakhstan as a Sovereign State' outlined plans for the country's domestic and foreign policies going forward. While at times unclear and disjointed in its structure, the 'Strategy' is clear in its belief that a multi-vector foreign policy is key to Kazakhstan's survival and development.

In 1995, Oumirseric Kasenov, then director of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, a government-sponsored think-tank, outlined the foreign policy aims and conduct of an independent Kazakhstan for an English-speaking academic audience as part of a ten-volume series on the evolving role of the post-Soviet states in an international context. In his chapter he largely reiterates what Nazarbayev had written in his 'Strategy', however he offers a more coherent and structured approach to Kazakhstan's foreign policy plans. Five key areas of international relations were outlined by Nazarbayev in 1992, and Kasenov prioritised them as follows: the first and most important was the special relationship with Russia; the second was its relationship with the other post-Soviet Central Asian states; the third area, aimed at diversifying its international network, was relations with Turkey, Iran and Pakistan; the fourth was relations with China which could provide an in-road to the Pacific region; and the fifth area outlined was Kazakhstan's relations with the United States, Japan and Europe.³⁰ Nazarbayev also highlighted Kazakhstan's geopolitical position, 'linking Europe and the Asia-Pacific region'.³¹ From the beginning, therefore, the aim was to pursue a multi-vector policy in light of the main priorities of Kazakh foreign policy as observed by Kasenov: strengthening state sovereignty and territorial integrity; protecting economic interests; and ensuring free access to external markets. Because of the relative weakness of its armed forces in the face of Russia and China, this would only be possible in alliance with these and other states. 'The peculiarity of Kazakhstan's foreign policy,' writes Kasenov, 'is that it must preserve relations of equality with Russia and other states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS, an organisation formed in 1991 comprising most ex-Soviet republics), continue the dialogue with the West, and be

³⁰ Kasenov, Oumirseric. 'The Institutions and Conduct of the Foreign Policy of Post-Communist Kazakhstan' in Dawisha, Adeed & Dawisha, Karen (eds.) (1995). *The Making of Foreign Policy in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*. (New York: M.E. Sharpe), pp. 266-67

³¹ Nazarbayev (1992), 'Strategy for the formation and development of Kazakhstan as a sovereign state', p. 49. All translations my own unless otherwise noted.

diplomatically active in the East in order to overcome its former estrangement from Asia.³²

It was one thing for such a strategy to be written down, but another thing completely for it to be executed in practice. The order of priorities of foreign relations, for example, was written with a clear preference for geographical distance and not strictly followed. However, observers have largely lauded the success of Kazakh multi-vectorism from its outset until at least the late 2000s and beyond, so Kazakhstan appears to have effectively responded to its precarious independent position and carried out a successful multi-vector foreign policy.³³ This came as the result of a delicate balancing act in domestic and foreign policy which will be explored below within the context of the four factors.

2.2. The Power of Pragmatism: Demographics, Ethnicity & National Identity

Certain conditions with which Kazakhstan began its independence in 1991 had to be addressed and came to be vital in forming both domestic and foreign policy. These included a fragile economic situation, a wealth of natural resources, a landlocked geographical position, its Soviet legacy and the continuing influence of Russia, and its ethno-demographic situation. The latter was one of the most crucial, as it was closely linked to the Soviet legacy and Russia's influence, as well as security concerns. At the moment Kazakhstan became independent, ethnic Kazakhs made up 40.1% of the population and European Slavs (Russians, Ukrainians and Byelorussians – the *de facto* upper caste of the Soviet Union) 43.9%; other smaller ethnic groups, mainly Germans, Tatars, Uzbeks and Uyghurs, made up the remainder.³⁴ Soviet policies had played a major role in the formation of this particular ethnic make-up: between the census years

³² Kasenov (1995), 'The Institutions and Conduct', p. 270

³³ Karpas, Kemal H. (1995a). 'The Role of Turkey and Iran in Incorporating the Former Soviet Republics into the World System,' in Dawisha, Karen (ed.) (1995). *The International Dimension of Post-Communist Transitions in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*. (New York: M.E. Sharpe), p. 172; Cummings (2003), 'Eurasian bridge'; Hanks (2009), 'Multi-vector politics'; Buzan, Barry & Waever, Ole (2003). *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 405

³⁴ Statistics obtained from United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Minorities and Participation in Public Life: Kazakhstan*. (Bishkek: 2004)

of 1926 and 1939, the proportion of Kazakhs dropped from 58.5% to 37.8%, and in 1959 had reached a low of 30%.³⁵ Incidentally, when speaking of 'ethnic Kazakhs', the term itself becomes problematic. Between the 1926 and 1939 censuses, there was a considerable reduction in the number of nationalities one could choose from, and while more were again evident in 1959, there were still not as many as in 1926: some nationalities were simply removed from existence. Thus, when referring to ethnic Kazakhs, we are referring to a group of people constructed by the Soviet Union to give credibility to its divide and rule policies. Beginning with the process of national-territorial delimitation in the 1920s when the Soviet leadership attempted to create autonomous republics based on ethnic groups and redrew the borders of Central Asia, borderlands became melting pots of different nationalities, not least because an area in which over 120 different nationalities resided became a mere five republics. The KSSR was home to many Uzbeks and Kyrgyz who had been left on the 'wrong' side of the border. But while this accounts for some of the smaller ethnic minorities who found themselves living on Kazakh territory, it does not explain the significant proportion of European Slavs. The transference of Russians to the top political positions in the republics was indeed common practice, but no other Central Asian republic was home to as many Russians as Kazakhstan. To be sure, the KSSR was the only republic bordering Russia, which played an important role in facilitating migration, but Kazakhstan was also the location of an enormous Gulag network, most notably the Karaganda Corrective Labour Camp which is estimated to have housed over a million prisoners, mostly purged Europeans, and have covered an area roughly the size of France.³⁶ Children born to the prisoners often remained and settled in Kazakhstan: Peyrouse notes that 66% of all Russians in Kazakhstan in 2007 were born there.³⁷ Furthermore, mass man-made famines in the 1920s and 1930s were responsible for the 'genocide' of an estimated 38% of all ethnic Kazakhs.³⁸ Later, under Khrushchev, the Virgin Lands Campaign

³⁵ Data obtained from Demoscope.ru: http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_nac_26.php?reg=1476;
http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_39.php?reg=10;
http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_59.php?reg=91

³⁶ <https://www.karlag.kz/art.php?id=14>; although this could be hyperbole, it undoubtedly covered a huge area and was one of the largest Gulag networks of the Soviet Union.

³⁷ Peyrouse, Sebastian (2007). 'Nationhood and the Minority Question in Central Asia: the Russians in Kazakhstan.' *Europe-Asia Studies*, 59:3, p. 482

³⁸ Volkava, Elena (2012). 'The Kazakh Famine of 1930-33 and the Politics of History in the Post-Soviet Space.' *The Wilson Center*

involved driving out ethnic Kazakhs from the north of the country to make way for Europeans.³⁹ As a result of these policies, when the Soviet Union dissolved and the autonomous republics became independent states, Kazakhstan became the only post-Soviet republic in which the titular nationality did not hold an ethnic majority. Nazarbayev, therefore, had to walk a fine line. On the one hand he had to begin some form of nation building in order to make tentative steps towards pacifying emerging Kazakh nationalists, and on the other hand had to remain aware that, at the time, Boris Yeltsin was advocating the 'strong defence' of all Russians who now found themselves living outside the borders of the Russian Federation. Appeasing both Kazakhs and Russians – and by extension the Kremlin – was crucial. Nazarbayev was forced to respond to these historically-charged demographic realities and did so with pragmatism and a deft combination of pro-Kazakh but not actively anti-Russian policies.

Most critical in the early 1990s was addressing the dense concentration of ethnic Russians around Kazakhstan's northern border. In all of the nine northern oblasts which bordered Russia, ethnic Russians made up at least 50% of the population; in larger cities such as Petropavl, Pavlodar and Astana this was as high as 80%.⁴⁰ This was the evidence cited by certain Russian nationalists who were calling for the absorption of these areas into the Russian Federation. Many scholars quote ex-dissident author and Nobel Prize winner Alexander Solzhenitsyn's advocacy of secession in 1990, but more significant and threatening was that from Andrainik Migranian, a Russian political scientist and member of the Presidential Council, an advisory body, who wrote very explicitly in the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* in 1994: 'There are many political forces in Russia who do not recognise the territorial integrity of Kazakhstan and existing borders between Kazakhstan and Russia, and define northern Kazakhstan as a natural part of Russia because of its large Russian population.'⁴¹ Nevertheless, Nazarbayev was adamant that the dual citizenship that both Yeltsin and many Russians were pushing for would not slide, as this could have been a practical step towards the secession of the north of the country.⁴² He did not, however, prevent Russians from returning to the Russian

³⁹ Olcott, Martha Brill (2010). *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise?* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), p. 13

⁴⁰ Olcott (1996), *Central Asia's New States*, p. 60

⁴¹ Quoted in Kasenov. 'The Institutions and Conduct,' p. 274

⁴² Roy (2000), *The Creation of Nations*, p. 135

Federation: the two presidents ensured that the process for exchanging citizenship was smooth. The early 1990s was a tense period for Kazakh-Russian relations, and the 1994 invasion of Chechnya was seen as 'a bloody demonstration of what Russia was capable of if provoked'.⁴³

Nazarbayev consequently carried out domestic policies which would not actively antagonise the Russians living in Kazakhstan. In the constitution, for example, the expression 'Kazakh nation' was replaced with 'the people of Kazakhstan' and indeed, as Pål Kolstø notes, a rhetoric of 'one people' was evident in speeches made by Nazarbayev in this period. He referenced the USA as an example of a state 'which consist[s] of even more nationals and nationalities than we have in Kazakhstan ... [and in which] patriotism is particularly well-developed', seeming to imply that a patriotic and homogenous state was possible even with an ethnically fragmented demography.⁴⁴ As will be shown in Chapter 3, this rhetoric has seen a resurgence in recent years. More practically in the 1990s, ethnic Russians were appointed to key positions in the new government, such as the head of the Economic Ministry, or the Deputy Prime Minister in charge of economic relations.⁴⁵

At the same time, Nazarbayev wanted to forge some kind of national identity in order to distance Kazakhstan from its former master, as Soviet policy in the republics had not only affected demographics. Russification programmes carried out from the 1930s onwards ensured the domination of the Russian language, the glorification of Russian national heroes and culture, the Union-wide shift to the Cyrillic alphabet in 1940, and consequently an enhanced prestige for anything considered purely 'Russian'. In combination with the legacy of the 'genocides' and suffering at the hands of the Russians since the days of empire, this left a bitter taste in the mouths of Kazakh nationalists. The first step was to begin to redress the demographic imbalance. Policies to this end included facilitating the mass resettlement of the Kazakh diaspora, which could be found across the entire territory of the former Soviet Union and in the Western Chinese province of Xinjiang, incentives for Kazakhs to have larger families, and the

⁴³ Olcott (2010), *Unfulfilled Promise*, p. 4

⁴⁴ Quoted in Kolstø, Pål (2000). *Political Construction Sites: Nation-Building in Russia and the Post-Soviet States*. (New York: Routledge), p. 127

⁴⁵ Olcott (1996), *Central Asia's New States*, p. 70

transference of the capital from Almaty in the south to Akmola (later renamed Astana) in the north.⁴⁶ Also in the north, the reorganisation of the Kostanay and Tselinograd oblasts was carried out in order that Russians would no longer hold an absolute majority in the regional administration.⁴⁷ Early language policy was also designed with the Kazakhs in mind: Russian became an 'official' language below the 'state' language of Kazakh, which points towards a certain hierarchy, even if, according to the constitution, both languages and nationalities enjoyed exactly the same rights.

Martha Brill Olcott praises the success of these pragmatic policies. Nazarbayev's ability to avoid the volatile ethnic tensions that emerged in many other parts of the former USSR has to do with his personality and pragmatism, she argues. His upbringing and education meant he was equally at ease 'in a Russian-dominated Communist Party milieu and the rural Kazakh community in which he was raised', recalling Hermann's study of the personal characteristics of leaders.⁴⁸ Furthermore, she notes that Nazarbayev understood and elucidated the difference between Russian culture — seen positively — and Soviet rule which was viewed negatively. This is in contrast to Islam Kamirov of Uzbekistan, for example, who tended to conflate the two which led to a souring of Uzbek-Russian relations.⁴⁹ Buzan and Waever agree with Olcott, noting that Kazakhstan stands out among post-Soviet states due to Nazarbayev's 'elegant balance' between national protection and inclusive strategies in both domestic and foreign policy.⁵⁰ Sebastian Peyrouse disagrees. He argues that these seemingly 'pragmatic' policies were actually anti-Russian from the outset. According to him, since the early 1990s Russians have been at a 'strong linguistic disadvantage' in Kazakhstan and excluded from jobs in the state administration, which requires fluency in Kazakh.⁵¹ However, Peyrouse himself states that well over half of all Russians in Kazakhstan in the 1990s had been born there, and a majority of the remainder had lived in Kazakhstan for over 20 years. Soviet policy goes some way to explain their deficiency in Kazakh, due to the

⁴⁶ Olcott (2010), *Unfulfilled Promise*, p. 13

⁴⁷ Bolozov, Pyotr (2016). 'Три угрозы для Назарбаева: насколько стабилен Казахстан' [Three Threats for Nazarbayev: How Stable is Kazakhstan]. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 25 August 2016

⁴⁸ Olcott (2010), *Unfulfilled Promise*, p. 28

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67

⁵⁰ Buzan & Waever (2003), 'The post-Soviet space: a regional security complex around Russia,' in *Idem.* (2003), *Regions and Powers: the structure of international security*, p. 405

⁵¹ Peyrouse (2007), 'Nationhood and the Minority Question in Central Asia,' p. 485

prevalence of Russian, but post-independence policies ‘against’ Russian could not have been so severe so as to dramatically reduce the use and utility of Russian. Still a significant majority of Russians does not speak Kazakh, which points towards the widespread acceptance and facilitation of Russian as a language of communication and commerce, and the lack of motivation for Russians to learn Kazakh. Many Kazakhs understand Russian better than they do Kazakh, and a lack of knowledge of Kazakh does not significantly reduce ones chances in society.

In light of the potential security threat from Russia based on Moscow’s assertiveness in the *russkiy mir* – also termed the ‘near abroad’ by the Kremlin – it was also necessary for Kazakhstan to look to other partners in order to balance this threat. With Cold War rivalries still deeply ingrained, the US became an obvious choice, but China and the European Union were also important early vectors of Kazakh foreign policy. These relationships are more heavily based on economics and will be explained in more detail in the following sections, but Nazarbayev was quick to spread Kazakhstan’s diplomatic roots in the early 1990s so as to create a broad base of security and economic partners.

But not everything can be ascribed to Nazarbayev’s pragmatism. The avoidance of interethnic strife in Kazakhstan also has to do with the mass outmigration of Russians in the first decade of independence. Upwards of 2 million Russians – more than one quarter of the Russian population – left Kazakhstan between 1992 and 2002, obviously either unhappy at becoming a minority in the land where they had previously held a majority, wary of the direction the country was going, or believing they had more chances – social, economic or otherwise – in the Russian Federation. By 2009 still more had left, but in less dramatic numbers, and Russians constituted 23.7% of the population.⁵² Demography may therefore not have been in favour of the Kazakhs, but time was. The dissipation of tensions between Kazakhstan and Russia suggests that, while certain policies may not have been well-received by the Russian population, they were good enough for Moscow, which may well have been more focussed on its own domestic and economic issues at the time. However, as French political scientist Olivier

⁵² Kazakhstan, *CIA World Factbook*. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kz.html>

Roy argues, by the 2000s interethnic strife may in fact not have been completely avoided. He wrote in 2000 that 'Kazakhstan has recently seen the arrival of 300,000 Chinese' which began to sow the seeds of unrest in the east of the country.⁵³ China furthermore criticises Kazakhstan's alleged support of the Uyghurs, a Turkic ethnic group living predominantly in the Xinjiang Region of western China, many of whom crossed the border to the west either to seek employment or escape persecution. This dynamic will be picked up in Chapter 3.

Despite the demographic shift in favour of the Kazakhs, who by 1999 had achieved a majority, national identity in Kazakhstan remained weaker than in other post-Soviet states. Sally Cummings argues that this came about because Kazakh independence was not based on nationalism, but by default when the Soviet Union collapsed.⁵⁴ But this is, of course, true of all post-Soviet states. She goes further and notes that the state was deprived of an immediate source of legitimacy in the form of mono-ethnic nationalism. The political elite, however, has become almost mono-ethnic, dominated by Kazakhs. Olcott writes that the government in Astana 'has favoured the interests of ethnic Kazakhs over the country's other ethnic communities'. The policies undertaken are geared toward 'a future in which the Kazakhs will be a large enough majority to dominate the country.'⁵⁵ But still, as of 2010, the ethnic Russians were still 'Kazakhstan's Achilles' heel', as she put it: they still constituted a large enough part of society – almost a quarter – that the government could not ignore their interests.

A weak national identity, however, was actually conducive to the foreign policy that Nazarbayev wished to pursue, argues Cummings. 'Multi-ethnicity and a multidirectional foreign policy coincide,' she writes and quotes Kasenov: 'Kazakhstan formulates and carries out foreign policy that expresses the interests of the state as a whole rather than of any particular ethnic group, including Kazakhs.'⁵⁶ Nazarbayev himself noted in 1997 that: 'The ethnic composition of our country is too diverse ... for us to afford dependence on the relations with some certain country.'⁵⁷ For Cummings

⁵³ Roy (2000), *The New Central Asia*, p. 189

⁵⁴ Cummings (2003), 'Eurasian bridge,' p. 145

⁵⁵ Olcott (2010), *Unfulfilled Promise*, p. 51-2

⁵⁶ Kasenov (1995), 'The Institutions and Conduct,' p. 265, quoted in Cummings (2003), 'Eurasian bridge,' p. 144

⁵⁷ 'The strategy for the development of the Republic of Kazakhstan until the year 2030.' http://www.akorda.kz/ru/official_documents/strategies_and_programs, p. 18

and Olcott, these domestic factors were the most important in defining and allowing Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy direction. Firstly, responding to a potential security threat from Russia, Kazakhstan had to both pacify the Kremlin and quickly open relations with the USA and China to balance the threat. Second, the motley demography meant that Kazakhstan was able to practice flexible relations with often contradictory states; a weak self-identity prevents one strong foreign policy direction.⁵⁸ Most agree that Nazarbayev's pragmatic balancing act between the Kazakhs and the Russians, and between old and new bilateral partners led to a successful multi-vector foreign policy, but some disagree that ethnicity, demography and national identity were the main factors. They argue instead that economic interests took centre stage. As will be explained, some of the same Soviet policies that defined Kazakhstan's demographics had similar implications for its economy.

2.3. Old Partners and New Pipelines: Economic Interests

Economic interests are a vital consideration in any state's foreign policy, and in Kazakhstan the Soviet legacy has been vital in informing these interests. The KSSR had been a raw materials hub for the Soviet Union, mainly supplying manufacturing plants on what would become the territory of the Russian Federation. Oil and gas from Kazakhstan was routinely sent to Russia for processing and refinement as the necessary infrastructure was based outside of the republic. This left the economies of Kazakhstan and Russia inexorably intertwined upon independence as Russia was left in control of the refinement and manufacturing facilities, while Kazakhstan retained its natural resources; import and export practices were unable to change dramatically for many years. Employment practices in the USSR had also left European Slavs in almost exclusive control of the important industrial and extraction sectors of Kazakhstan's economy which were mainly focused close to the Russian border in the north, as well as other key technological centres. For example, in 1991 the Baikonur Spaceport employed over 8000 highly-trained Russians but only 38 Kazakhs.⁵⁹ Furthermore, all industrial plants in the country in the mid-1990s still required component parts from Russia or

⁵⁸ Cummings (2003), 'Eurasian bridge,' p. 146

⁵⁹ Olcott (1996), *Central Asia's New States*, p. 72

Ukraine.⁶⁰ The outcome of these heavily intertwined economies was twofold. Firstly, Nazarbayev was a very vocal advocate of the maintenance of some kind of economic union of post-Soviet states, which would partially manifest itself in the CIS. Although a functioning free trade area was not established until 2011, the Commonwealth facilitated good relations, trade and investment between the member states. Secondly, plans had to be made in order to reduce dependence on Russia: Kazakhstan had to both improve its manufacturing infrastructure domestically and diversify its international economic partners so as to become part of the global economy.

Initially, the CIS comprised just Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, and its formation in 1991 as many republics were announcing their independence effectively announced the end of the USSR. 'Nazarbayev's nightmare in 1991,' writes Roy, 'was the establishment of a Slavic bloc of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.'⁶¹ He made sure he was there as close to the inception of the CIS as possible so as to keep Kazakhstan within the rouble zone and maintain access to a large market. In 1992 and 1993, however, the rouble was gradually phased out in the former republics. Some, such as Ukraine and the Baltics, actively decided to leave the rouble zone and did so in 1992, while others were 'simply pushed out' by Russia in 1993; this latter group included Kazakhstan.⁶² Nazarbayev was furthermore one of the most vocal advocates of rebuilding the rouble zone in 1994, which both points towards the closeness of the two economies and is another example of an attempt to pacify the large Russian population. The reintroduction of the rouble would have provided more incentive for the Russian technical experts, who were emigrating in their masses, to remain in the country. Across the whole of the former Soviet Union there was an economic crisis in the 1990s, beginning around 1992/3, stabilising in the middle of the decade and then flaring up again in 1998 as a result of the financial crisis in Russia, whose economy remained the cornerstone of the economies of the old republics. Because many newly independent states were making efforts to forge economic links with non-CIS countries, only 40-60% of financial obligations between CIS states in the early 1990s were honoured. Kazakhstan saw a

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 62, 65

⁶¹ Roy (2000), *The New Central Asia*, p. 134

⁶² Dąbrowski, Marek (1995). 'The Reasons of the Collapse of the Ruble Zone.' *Center for Social & Economic Research*, p. 19

marked growth in bartering activities, exchanging raw materials for consumer goods which often did not have an equivalent value.⁶³ But leaving the rouble zone was a blessing in disguise for Nazarbayev, as Kazakhstan was spared the worst effects of the crises, and was able to pursue a fully independent monetary policy.

In its early years, the CIS was regarded as a failure.⁶⁴ Firstly, it remained dominated by Russia who was by far and away the leading member, both politically and economically, which led to certain coercive politics to be discussed below. There was also an imbalance of relationships of the member states with Russia. Secondly, states had fundamentally different goals based on economic and geopolitical realities. While it was in Kazakhstan's interests to retain close ties with Russia, Ukraine, for example, immediately looked westward and tried to leave Moscow's orbit. This meant that, thirdly, the dissolution process was often stronger than the integration process and there was only a weak yet necessary bond between the new states and Russia.⁶⁵ The fear of creating a new USSR was palpable, preventing the establishment of a supranational regulatory body that could have increased efficient coordination between states.⁶⁶

In 2001, eminent Russian scholar Alexei Vassiliev wrote: 'It is absolutely obvious that the future successful development of the Central Asian states is dependent on close economic links with Russia, ... at least for the foreseeable future. [...] Scientific and technical cooperation with Russia is an absolute must.'⁶⁷ This observation was one of the motivating factors for Nazarbayev's multi-vector pursuit. Firstly, Kazakhstan recognised and responded to this dependence. Concessions, sometimes in breach of state sovereignty, were made in order to ensure positive economic relations with Russia. The Baikonur Spaceport, for example, will remain under Russian control until at least 2050, and on negotiating the Kazakh-Russian border in the Caspian Sea, Nazarbayev noted: 'It is better to export oil from 90% of the territory we claim [in the Caspian] than nothing

⁶³ Kalinichenko, L.N. & Semenova, N.N. 'The Economy of Kazakhstan.' In Vassiliev, Alexei (ed.) (2001). *Central Asia: Political and Economic Challenges in the Post-Soviet Era*. (London: Saqi Books), p. 66

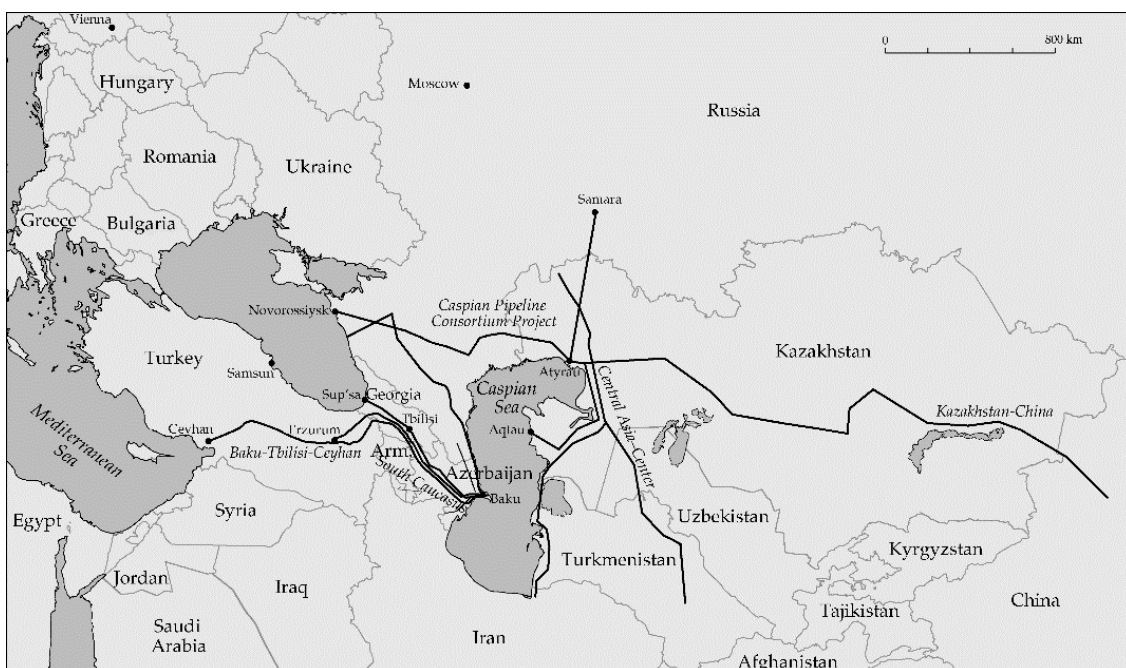
⁶⁴ See Khanna, Parag (2008). *The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order*. (New York: Random House), p. 70; Kasenov (1995), 'The Institutions and Conduct,' p. 272; Vassiliev, Alexei (ed.) (2001). *Central Asia: Political and Economic Challenges in the Post-Soviet Era*. (London: Saqi Books), p. 20

⁶⁵ Kasenov (1995), 'The Institutions and Conduct,' p. 272

⁶⁶ Vassiliev (2001), *Political and Economic Challenges in the Post-Soviet Era*, p. 25

⁶⁷ Vassiliev, A.M. 'Russia and Central Asia,' in Vassiliev, Alexei (ed.) (2001). *Central Asia: Political and Economic Challenges in the Post-Soviet Era*. (London: Saqi Books), p. 15, 18

from 100% of what Kazakhstan claims.⁶⁸ Secondly, after 1991, efforts were made to forge productive economic links with countries outside the CIS. Nazarbayev very quickly made overtures with the United States and secured their cooperation in dismantling the nuclear arsenal left over from the Soviet Union. China also became an important early partner, and Nazarbayev made his first official visit to Beijing in October 1993 where he and Li Peng signed the Joint Statement on the Foundation of Friendly Relations between the two countries.⁶⁹ Another early vector was Turkey, with which Kazakhstan quickly established economic, diplomatic and cultural relations. And, in 1994, Kazakhstan signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU, becoming the first Central Asian country to do so.⁷⁰ By 1996, there were 760 joint ventures with foreign companies in various industries, the main partners being Switzerland, the USA, Turkey, and China, as well as Russia.⁷¹ However, the main draw of investment was in the oil and gas industry. The US Chevron Company was granted shares in the vast Tengiz oil field near Atyrau on the shores of the Caspian (see Map 2) in 1993, and by 2000 held a 50% stake.



⁶⁸ Quoted in Idan & Shaffer, 'The Foreign Policies of Post-Soviet Landlocked States,' p. 254

⁶⁹ 'Brief introduction to relations between China and Kazakhstan.' *China Daily*, 27 May 2003.

http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-05/27/content_166588.htm

⁷⁰ 'EU-Kazakhstan Relations,' *European External Action Service*, <https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/en/4076/EU-Kazakhstan%20relations>

⁷¹ Kalinichenko & Semenova, 'The Economy of Kazakhstan,' p. 71

*Map 2: The Caspian Pipeline Network.*⁷²

This did not come without some difficulty, however. Russian pipeline politics led to the development of the field being ‘plagued with problems’: unless allowed a significant share, Russia would not allow pipelines from the field to cross Russian territory, which would have raised the transport costs to Europe significantly.⁷³ Indeed, Russian pressure and economic troubles in Kazakhstan meant that more concessions were given to Russian companies in other industries, and gas was sold to Russia at discounted rates.⁷⁴ Kasenov wrote despairingly: ‘Russia is holding Kazakhstan hostage, using its monopoly on the pipelines to control the gas and oil from the Caspian region.’⁷⁵ In the present scenario, Russia holds the largest shares in the Caspian Pipeline Consortium’s pipeline which runs between Tengiz and Novorossiysk. But the Tengiz-Novorossiysk pipeline (opened in 2003) is not the only one running from the northern Caspian region. In 1997, the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation acquired 60% shares in two other oil fields in the region, and the Atyrau-Alashankou pipeline – the first direct oil pipeline between Kazakhstan and China – was officially opened in 2005.

President Tokayev, who was Kazakhstan’s Foreign Minister from 2002-07, said in 2003: ‘As far as pipelines are concerned, our policy is clear and simple: have as many export routes as possible.’⁷⁶ And indeed, the combination of vast natural resources and a relatively secure political environment has made Kazakhstan the most attractive post-Soviet state for foreign investment, which is paying dividends.⁷⁷ China overtook Russia as Kazakhstan’s largest bilateral trade partner in 2007 and trade between the two countries increased from 512 million in 1993 to 25 billion in 2010.⁷⁸ America’s oil and gas interests in the region led to a sharp increase in trade around the year 2000, as Kazakhstan began to expand its manufacturing sector with heavy machinery imported from the US.⁷⁹ Roy made a claim in 2000 that ‘Nazarbayev wants to hitch Kazakhstan to

⁷² Idan & Schaffer, ‘The Foreign Policies of Post-Soviet Landlocked States,’ p. 253

⁷³ Olcott (1996), *Central Asia’s New States*, p. 79

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Kasenov (1995), ‘The Institutions and Conduct,’ p. 275

⁷⁶ Quoted in Hanks (2009), ‘Multi-vector politics,’ p. 264

⁷⁷ Olcott (1996), *Central Asia’s New States*, p. 76

⁷⁸ Clarke (2015), ‘Kazakhstan’s Multi-vector Foreign Policy’

⁷⁹ ‘What does the United States export to Kazakhstan? (2000)’ *The Observatory of Economic Complexity*.
https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/export/usa/kaz/show/2000/

the Russian train, but throw the Russians out of the first-class compartment,⁸⁰ and it seems that by the early 2010s he had been successful in this regard, at least economically. Russia was still a large and important economic partner, but was balanced by China, the USA, and the EU, Kazakhstan's largest collective trade partner. By 2011, Chinese state-owned companies controlled nearly a quarter of Kazakh oil production and China has become a more cooperative partner than Russia (although Putin has shown more benevolence in this area than his predecessor).⁸¹ For example, Beijing has been willing to meet the Kazakh condition that KazMunayGas, the largest state-owned company, be involved in all joint ventures between the two countries. Yet there is a pervasive and growing fear amongst certain parts of the population that the rise of China could sow demographic problems, particularly in the west of the country, as ethnic Kazakhs respond to a greater Chinese presence there; here, economic and demographic interests come into conflict, a dynamic which will be explored in more depth in Chapters 2 and 3. A crucial consideration in the development of Kazakhstan's economy and its oil and gas industry has been its geographical position, which will be discussed as the third factor.

2.4. *Fuel and Frontiers: The Role of Geography*

When considering Kazakhstan's foreign policy, Nicholas J. Spykman's famous adage that 'Geography is the most fundamental factor in foreign policy as it is the most permanent' acquires specific importance. Spykman drew heavily on Halford Mackinder's 'Heartland' theory, in which Kazakhstan takes centre stage: 'He who controls the Heartland controls the world.' Although this theory has been subject to much critique since its inception in the early 1900s, there is no denying that the unique position of the country required Nazarbayev to take certain considerations. Firstly, it is the only Central Asian country to share borders with both Russia and China. The Russia-Kazakhstan border is 6846km long and does not follow a natural boundary — the northern regions are an extension of the Ural Mountains and Siberian steppe. Kazakhstan exclusively borders the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China for 1783km. The lack of natural borders has

⁸⁰ Roy (2000), *The New Central Asia*, p. 191

⁸¹ Clarke (2015), 'Kazakhstan's Multi-vector Foreign Policy'

facilitated decades of cross-border migration and marriage, meaning that these border regions are often very multi-ethnic, even for Kazakhstan. 8.3% of the population of Xinjiang is Kazakh, and the region even has an autonomous Kazakh prefecture, and 6-7% of the Almaty region in eastern Kazakhstan is Uyghur. Secondly, the country has been blessed with a wealth of natural resources, including significant reserves of oil, gas, minerals, and ores. As shown in the previous section, this has had both positive and negative effects on the country's economy. Finally, a major aspect of Kazakhstan's geography is its landlocked position. A lack of access to the sea was highlighted in 1992 by Nazarbayev as a key consideration in the development of foreign relations.⁸²

Avinoam Idan and Brenda Shaffer, a geographer and a political scientist writing in *Post-Soviet Affairs*, underscore this latter point in their study of the foreign policies of landlocked post-Soviet states.⁸³ They argue that landlocked states face a 'powerful constraint on their foreign policy options' as they need to gain and maintain transit access in neighbouring (transit) states in order to participate in wider international trade. There are clear expressions of the fact that Kazakhstan responded to its landlocked status in developing its foreign policy of which we have already seen evidence.⁸⁴ These are: the use of multiple pipelines; special policies toward their transit states; investment in infrastructure in their port states (states from which they can export materials and goods by sea); and a general multi-directional strategic orientation. Although it is expensive and complicated to have a multi-directional pipeline infrastructure (see Map 2), the permanent nature of oil pipelines makes them susceptible to disruption and political manipulation along the supply line and leaves producer countries dependent on transit and port states. Kazakhstan has invested heavily especially in Georgia, as well as Azerbaijan and Turkey, and has also granted distinctive concessions to its transit states, most notably Russia.⁸⁵ For Reuel R. Hanks, a geographer specialising on Central Asia, the economic aspects of this factor, i.e. the exploitation of the country's resources, provided the most important motivation for Kazakhstan to maintain its multi-vector approach into the 2000s. He also argues that the

⁸² Nazarbayev (1992), 'Strategy of the formation and development of Kazakhstan as a sovereign state,' p. 49

⁸³ Idan & Shaffer (2011), 'The Foreign Policies of Post-Soviet Landlocked States'

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 243

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 250-52

resources are an important in-road for many bilateral relationships and make Kazakhstan a more desirable and equal partner for countries such as China.⁸⁶

Its position also has implications for Kazakhstan's relationship with the West. Those post-Soviet states with access to the sea were more readily able to integrate with the West: states that have joined or attempted to join Euro-Atlantic strategic and economic alliances are the Baltics, Georgia and Ukraine, while the landlocked post-Soviet states have remained more strongly connected to Russia economically.⁸⁷ For this reason, amongst others, Kazakhstan has sought cooperative relations with Turkey. Maritime border disputes with Russia and Iran have prevented Kazakhstan from drilling a pipeline under the Caspian Sea, but nevertheless, tankers filled with Kazakh oil are routinely shipped across the sea to Azerbaijan to be sent along the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and thence to numerous destinations worldwide via the Mediterranean. While Iran could theoretically offer similar access to the sea and cut out the necessity of shipping across the Caspian, historical, cultural and religious factors make Turkey the more attractive partner. The Turkish and Kazakh languages share a common linguistic root, and indeed when Kazakh becomes fully 'Latinised' it will look very similar to Turkish, facilitating ease of communication. Kazakhstan emerged as one of the least religious of the new Central Asian states — another legacy of the USSR — and due to its ethnic make-up pursued a secular policy. This, along with the fact that most Kazakh Muslims are either non-denominational or Sunni, means that there are fundamental religious differences between Kazakhstan and Iran, where almost all Muslims are Shi'a. Looking even further back to history, Karpát writes that Shi'ism historically turned Persia into an enemy of the Central Asian khanates, a fact which only served to push Central Asia closer to the Ottoman Empire – Persia's arch-rival – by adding new politico-religious weight to their common linguistic and cultural ties.⁸⁸ For these reasons and Turkey's emergence as the terminal gate for loading and shipping oil and gas to the West, it has become an almost ideal partner for Kazakhstan. Yet although Nazarbayev has referred to the 21st century as 'the Turkic century', relations with Turkey are seldom discussed in the literature, which suggests that cooperation is overshadowed by other

⁸⁶ Hanks (2009), 'Multi-vector politics'

⁸⁷ Idan & Shaffer (2011), 'The Foreign Policies of Post-Soviet Landlocked States,' p. 244

⁸⁸ Karpát (1995a), 'The Role of Turkey and Iran,' p. 170

bilateral relations, such as those with Russia, China and the US. Turkey has, however, played an important role in the development of Kazakhstan's foreign policy and continues to do so. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

From 1991, Nazarbayev has envisioned Kazakhstan as a bridge between Europe and Asia, not dissimilar to how Turkey has presented itself, particularly since the AK Parti's coming to power. He wrote in his 'Strategy': 'As a result of the fall of the Soviet empire, a completely new geopolitical situation has emerged in which Kazakhstan enjoys a position which is favourable to its foreign political and strategic interests, connecting Europe with the Asia-Pacific region.'⁸⁹ Indeed, Kazakhstan itself has been an important transit state for trade between East and West since the days of the Silk Road. However, although Kazakhstan has forged successful bilateral relations with China, Russia and the countries of the West, there has been little 'connection' between them. As will be discussed in the following section, Kazakhstan has managed to secure entry to numerous supranational organisations in different regions, but none have really facilitated connection between Europe and the Asia-Pacific. Nevertheless, Kazakhstan has enjoyed the diplomatic benefits of its pan-continental position.

2.5. High Profile-Low Cost: Regime Legitimation

This fourth and final factor behind multi-vectorism is regime legitimation. It has been important for both Nazarbayev's image at home and on the world stage that the regime is seen as legitimate in order to ensure its survival. Early diplomatic overtures with China, as well as continued economic cooperation, ensure legitimation from the East, and Astana has proven itself as an important and relatively benign partner of Moscow. Legitimation from Western governments was less implicit on independence, and Nazarbayev's pursuit of Western partners has partly been to this end, and partly in the interests of diversifying economic partners. Seeking the USA's cooperation in dismantling the Soviet nuclear arsenal was a vital first step in this regard. Not only did it prove to the US that Kazakhstan wanted to shake off its Soviet shackles by choosing

⁸⁹ Nazarbayev (1992), 'Strategy of the formation and development of Kazakhstan as a sovereign state,' p. 49

them over Russia, it was an important green light for other Western countries to begin cooperative economic relations with Kazakhstan. Nazarbayev 'hyperactively' sought outside investment in the 1990s, and between 1992 and 1995 made official state visits to the United States, Belgium, Austria, France, Egypt, Turkey, Thailand, South Korea, Singapore, Indonesia, China, Mongolia, and India.⁹⁰ He both visited the Vatican and took part in the Hajj in 1994, looking for legitimisation also from religious figures.⁹¹ These trips paid off, and by the 2000s Kazakhstan not only had bilateral relations with over 110 countries, it was also a member of a plethora of supranational international and regional organisations in Europe and Asia.

As of 2010, Kazakhstan was a member of the United Nations (UN), the CIS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the OSCE, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the International Organisation of Turkic Culture (Türksoy). It is also a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace programme, designed to increase cooperation between NATO and Euro-Atlantic non-member states, including many former Soviet republics. Outside of the UN, these organisations represent a huge breadth of security partners including all EU countries through the OSCE, many Asia-Pacific countries through the SCO, and former Soviet states through the CSTO, and partnerships based on religious and cultural ties through the OIC and Türksoy. This is apparent confirmation of the success of Nazarbayev's multi-vector policies throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Michael Clarke comments that many of Nazarbayev's multilateral initiatives were 'high profile, relatively low cost, and rife with symbolic importance,' i.e. his real aim was regime legitimisation, rather than subscribing to the aims of the initiatives.⁹² A US diplomat in Astana said of Kazakhstan's role in the CSTO that 'actual contributions ... appear to be more political than substantive'.⁹³

Kazakhstan was an important regional partner of the USA during its War on Terror. Here, cooperation was not wholly superficial as genuine fears of extremism played a role, which can be understood based on Kazakhstan's proximity to the conflict, and its cooperation exceeded that of other Central Asian states, such as Turkmenistan.

⁹⁰ Clarke (2015), 'Kazakhstan's Multi-vector Foreign Policy'

⁹¹ Cummings (2003), 'Eurasian bridge', p. 147

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ US Embassy Astana. 'Kazakhstan: Scen setter for CentCom Commander General Petraeus.' WikiLeaks Cable: 10ASTANA251_a, 22 February 2010. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10ASTANA251_a.html

Nevertheless, Clarke argues that assistance in the War on Terror led to praise and legitimisation from the US, and this was indeed a key goal of cooperation.⁹⁴ The 2000s saw a number of initiatives seeking closer relations with the US in order to balance Russian influence. A leaked transcript of a high-level conversation between Nazarbayev and the US ambassador from 2009 shows the President almost desperate for US attention. It is clear that Nazarbayev believes association with the US will not only legitimise his regime to the Western international community, but also serve to balance Russian and Chinese power in the region:

'I would ask from my respected interlocutor President Obama fullest political support by regular high-level visits, including Congressional delegations. I very much need this on a regular basis because Moscow is always breathing down my neck. I will always be fully respectful to Moscow, but I very much want you to be a bigger and more equal player, too. I would be delighted to host President Obama in Astana, but I fully understand he has other priorities. However, if Secretary of State Clinton could visit relatively soon, that would make a most powerful regional statement that would not, I assure you, be ignored in other capitals -- I mean Moscow and Beijing. I want you to understand that I consider the United States a trustworthy partner.'⁹⁵

An important caveat to regime legitimisation is Kazakhstan's human rights record, which leaves much to be desired by Western norms. Lillis vividly describes the dire lack of press freedom and the right to assembly. Newspapers critical of the regime, while rarely being officially shut down, have been subject to malicious acts of terrorism and violence to force them into self-censorship. Workers at the now-defunct *Respublika* newspaper, for example, arrived at work one morning in 2002 to find a decapitated dog hung outside their office bearing the message: 'There will be no next time.' Years of torment later, including a firebombing in 2016, *Respublika* wrote its last article in 2017.⁹⁶ Political opponents are often used as scapegoats to remove them from the scene and further the interests of the regime, and arrests are commonplace during protests, even

⁹⁴ Clarke (2015), 'Kazakhstan's Multi-vector Foreign Policy'

⁹⁵ US Embassy Astana. 'Kazakhstan: Nazarbayev on Afghanistan, Iran, Russia, Relations with United States.' WikiLeaks Cable: 09ASTANA557_a, 11 March 2009.

https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09ASTANA557_a.html

⁹⁶ Lillis, *Dark Shadows*, p. 65

peaceful and officially sanctioned ones. In its 2015 report on the country, the Human Rights Watch wrote:

'Kazakhstan heavily restricts freedom of assembly, speech, and religion. In 2014, authorities closed newspapers, jailed or fined dozens of people after peaceful but unsanctioned protests, and fined or detained worshipers for practicing religion outside state controls. Government critics ... remained in detention after unfair trials.

In mid-2014, Kazakhstan adopted new criminal, criminal executive, criminal procedural, and administrative codes, and a new law on trade unions, which contain articles restricting fundamental freedoms and are incompatible with international standards. Torture remains common in places of detention.'⁹⁷

Kazakhstan furthermore receives a 22/100 freedom score from Freedom House.⁹⁸ But despite all of this, Kazakhstan has enjoyed significant legitimation from the West. In 2010, it became the first post-Soviet country to chair the OSCE, a huge victory for Nazarbayev. Commentators at the time lauded Kazakhstan's progressive role, noting: 'By choosing to chair a democratic pan-European security organization, Kazakhstan has made a clear statement that it pursues good relations with the West and commits to European values, including democracy.'⁹⁹ And while the OSCE initiated some programmes of democratic reform, and Kazakhstan made cursory commitments to reform media and election laws, the West has received criticism for being too weak in enforcing democratisation in the country. But from Nazarbayev's perspective, multi-vectorism had been successful in terms of legitimising his regime by the mid-2010s. Institutionalised diplomatic relations were in place that underpinned other aspects of the multi-vector approach such as a variety of diverse economic partners and a balanced and largely unthreatening security environment.

2.6. *Conclusion of Chapter*

⁹⁷ 'World Report 2015: Kazakhstan,' *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/kazakhstan>

⁹⁸ 'Freedom in the World 2019: Kazakhstan,' *Freedom House*. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/kazakhstan>

⁹⁹ Assenova, Margarita & Bugajski, Janusz (2009). 'Kazakhstan's OSCE Chairmanship: Challenges and Opportunities.' *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, p. vi

The above factors have influenced Kazakh foreign policy to different degrees at different times. Diffusing potential ethnic strife and maintaining good relations with Russia were most crucial in the early 90s, which involved diversifying bilateral relations and establishing friendly ties with a wealth of nations. When the security situation stabilised, the development of the economy took centre stage, closely followed by and linked to regime legitimisation.

By 2010, some important trends had become evident in the factors described above: demography was edging towards Kazakh 'supremacy'; there was a significant increase and diversification of economic partners; and Kazakhstan was firmly integrated into the international system, most significantly into certain aspects of Western architecture. However, it was still not at a point where it could or would carry out the alphabet shift. The idea had been in the background throughout the 1990s and 2000s and was brought up at various points as Central Asian neighbours made the shift from Cyrillic to Latin, but serious steps were never taken. Most recently in 2007, Nazarbayev said that he was in no rush to carry out the shift.¹⁰⁰ Changes in the above factors could point towards shifts in Kazakhstan's foreign relations or domestic situation which allowed for the transition to Latin to finally be announced in 2018.

Clarke argued that multi-vectorism peaked in the late 2000s and early 2010s when the US needed the strategic location and regional assistance of Kazakhstan in Afghanistan, Russia was somewhat less assertive in Central Asia than it would become, and China had not yet launched the Belt and Road Initiative. Now, he argued, Kazakhstan only has two undesirable yet unignorable vectors remaining: Russia and China.¹⁰¹ Clarke, however, largely conflates the West with the US and pays little attention to Kazakhstan's relationship with EU – its largest trade partner – which is likely to have been an important consideration in the alphabet shift; likewise, Turkey is hardly mentioned. In the following chapters, this will further emerge as an important relationship and balancer of relations with Russia and China. Chapters 3 to 6 will pick up each of the

¹⁰⁰ 'Nazarbayev: Kazakhstan should be in no hurry in Kazakh alphabet transformation to Latin.' *KazInform*, 13 December 2007. <http://www.inform.kz/showarticle.php?lang=eng&id=158363>

¹⁰¹ Clarke (2015), 'Kazakhstan's Multi-vector Foreign Policy'

factors and explore their development in the 2010s, looking for changes which point towards the motivation for the switch to Latin.

3. National Identity and Public Unrest

Ethnicity and Demography in the 2010s

Around 2009, at the time of the last major census, the domestic situation of Kazakhstan was as follows: Ethnic Kazakhs made up a majority of the population, at 63.1%, but European Slavs (with Russians consistently making up 94-6% of this group) still comprised 26.1%. Efforts to forge a strong national identity had not been made, particularly not one along ethnic Kazakh grounds – the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state, as Cummings argued, did not allow for this. The domestic factors that shape the Kazakh foreign policy elite's view of their international environment are arguably the ones over which they have the most control. While the regime can take measures to ensure its economic interests are met and it holds international legitimacy, these also depend heavily on the actions of other states. Domestic factors can more easily be shaped and influenced by the regime. As will be shown, in recent years Kazakhstan has made more headway in forging a national identity than ever before, and the ethnic make-up of the country is in constant flux and now heavily favours Kazakhs. In some ways there is less of a threat from Russia, but its assertiveness in Ukraine is a new and pressing source of concern.

3.1. What the Census Shows: Demographic Data

Figure 1 shows the ethno-demographic development of Kazakhstan over the course of the 20th century and into the 21st. The last extensive national census was carried out in 2009, with another planned for late 2019, but smaller regional censuses from 2014 and 2018 provide up-to-date data, and the dynamic going forward is clear. The effects of the Soviet past outlined in Chapter 2 can be seen from the early 1900s as the population of European Slavs dramatically increases at the expense of the ethnic Kazakh population. This trend steadily begins to reverse in the last third of the century before increasing in rapidity around the time of independence. Between 2009 and 2018 it slowed down again, and it can be assumed that 2019 will show a continuation of this trend: slightly more ethnic Kazakhs than in 2018 but not a significant increase. From 2014 to 2018

there was an increase in the ‘other’ group, which traditionally comprises mostly Uzbeks and Uyghurs. However, even though Kazakhs are once again the majority ethnic group, Slavs still make up a little more than one fifth of the population.

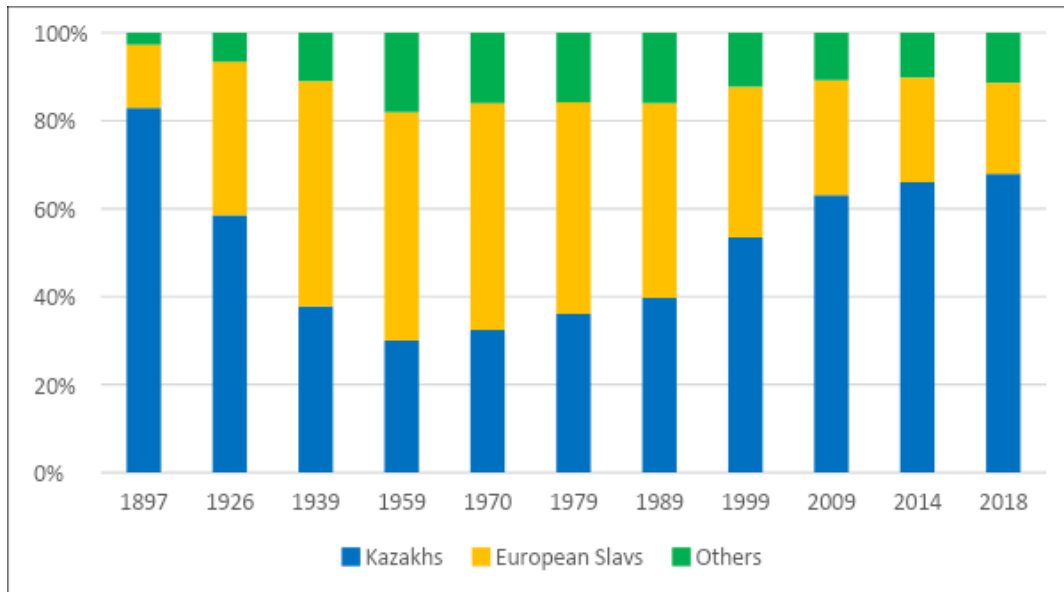
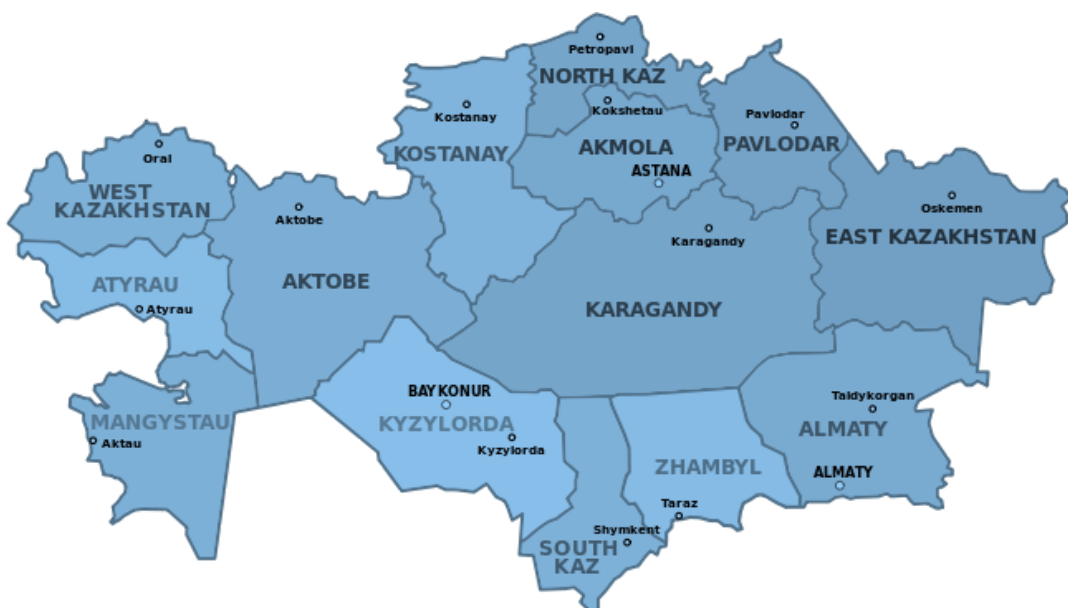


Figure 1: Demographics of Kazakhstan 1897-2018.¹⁰²



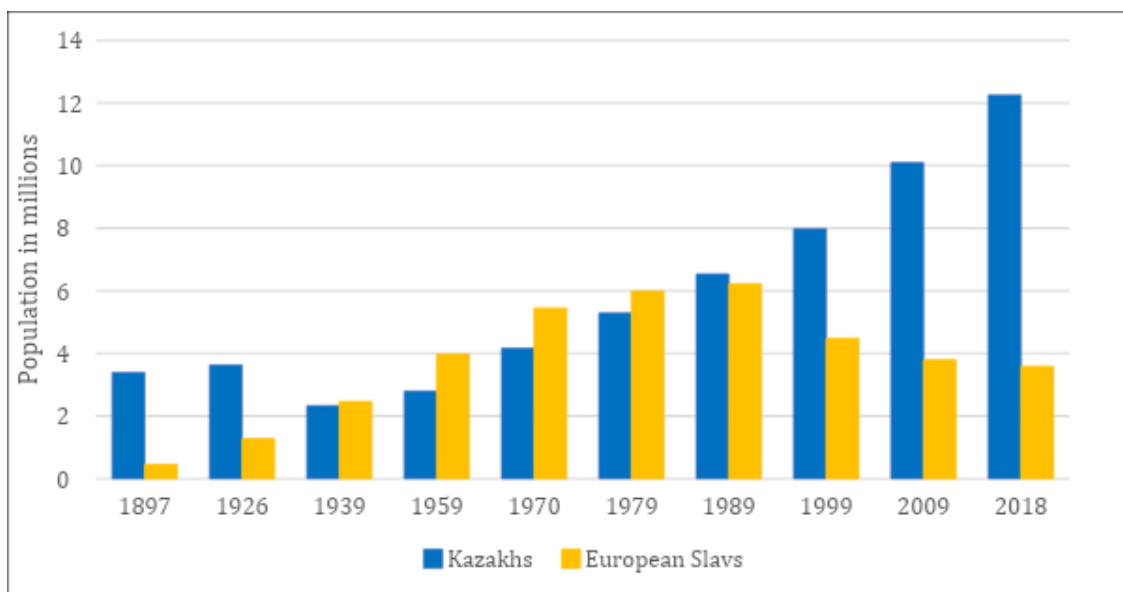
Map 3: Administrative Map of Kazakhstan, 2019.¹⁰³

The pro-Kazakh policies undertaken by Nazarbayev, such as resettling the Kazakh diaspora and providing incentives for large Kazakh families, have had some

¹⁰² Data obtained from demoscope.ru: http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/kaz_pop.php

¹⁰³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regions_of_Kazakhstan, accessed 10 June 2019

degree of success, but have not produced the overwhelming Kazakh majority that Olcott argues he was looking for. They have, however, resulted in only two oblasts – Kostanay and North Kazakhstan (see Map 3) – having a Russian majority. These are the two northernmost regions, and both have long borders with Russia. In both, the Russian population very slightly decreased between 1989 and 2018 – from 43.7% to 41.3%, and from 51.5% to 49.7% respectively – while the Kazakh population has increased more substantially – from 22.6% to 34.7%, and from 22.9% to 40.3%.¹⁰⁴ These figures show that while the Russian population may not be as rapidly declining as it did in the 1990s, the Kazakh population is on the rise, a country-wide trend shown in Figure 2 below.



*Figure 2: Population Trends of Kazakhs and European Slavs, 1897-2018.*¹⁰⁵

Unclear is the number of Han Chinese in the country, whose presence has become a strong source of discontent in the East Kazakhstan and Almaty oblasts. The census data from 2018 provides information on the number of Uyghurs, but it appears that Han are subsumed into the ‘other’ category. The 2009 census provided more detailed data: data covering 129 ethnic groups is available, as opposed to a mere 17 ethnic groups (plus ‘other’) in the smaller 2018 census. According to it, there were 3,424 ‘Chinese’ living in the country, a decrease from 1999.¹⁰⁶ Given the proximity of the two countries, this is an

¹⁰⁴ Data obtained from demoscope.ru: http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/kaz_pop.php

¹⁰⁵ Data obtained from demoscope.ru: http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/kaz_pop.php

¹⁰⁶ ‘Китайский’ (Chinese) in the Russian; ‘Хань’ (Han) is nowhere to be found in the census. See ‘National composition, religion and language proficiency in the Republic of Kazakhstan: results of the 2009 national census.’ *Statistics Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan*

anomalous result. All other bordering nationalities have significantly greater populations in Kazakhstan, including Uyghurs, who themselves make up less than half of the population of Xinjiang. This does also not align with Roy's claim of 300,000 Chinese entering the country around the year 2000 – a claim that goes unreferenced. As will be explored in depth later, the influx of Chinese workers worries many eastern Kazakhs, but with no detailed data until the results of the 2019 census are published, it is difficult to know if these worries are founded. Clear, however, is that the number of 'other' nationalities increased dramatically from 82,292 to 189,816 between 2009 and 2018,¹⁰⁷ perhaps belying a surge in Han migrants.

3.2. *The Eternal Nation: Towards a Stronger National Identity*

National identity has traditionally been weak in Kazakhstan. To recall Cummings, Kazakh independence was not based on popular nationalism, neither was there the possibility for a mono-ethnic source of national identity. In the 2010s, however, there have been greater strides to construct a Kazakhstani, as opposed to a Kazakh, national identity. This encompasses all peoples of Kazakhstan rather than just the titular ethnic group and places emphasis on shared Kazakh history. A decrease in the Slavic population could possibly be seen as the precursor to this, but Nazarbayev's personal reasoning is based on development. In 2012, the Kazakhstan-2050 development strategy was announced. The main goal of this strategy is for Kazakhstan to become one of the 30 most developed countries in the world by 2050. In Nazarbayev's view, 'all developed countries implement their modernisation projects on the basis of an *already established identity*'.¹⁰⁸ The prerequisite of a developed society, he believes, is a unified nation. It is this belief which underpins the recently-developed values system of '*mangilik-el*', or 'eternal nation'. This in turn is heavily rooted in history, for 'a nation that

¹⁰⁷ Численность населения Республики Казахстан по отдельным этносам на начало 2018 года [Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan by individual ethnic groups at the start of 2018]. *Statistics Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan*

¹⁰⁸ Nazarbayev, Nursultan. 'План нации – Путь к казахстанской мечте' [The Nation's plan – a path towards Kazakhstan's dream]. *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, 6 January 2016. <http://personal.akorda.kz/ru/category/stati/plan-nacii-put-k-kazahstanskoi-mechte#list38>. Italics my own.

does not know its history risks vanishing into obscurity'.¹⁰⁹ Under the Kazakhstan-2050 umbrella, certain concrete steps regarding 'identity and unity' were outlined, including the promotion of *mangilik-el* and programmes aimed at strengthening civil identity and patriotism.¹¹⁰ This values system is inclusive to all ethnic groups and languages of Kazakhstan, and Nazarbayev heavily promoted Kazakh-Russian-English trilingualism as part of Kazakhstan-2050 and in the years following.

2014 was a year of important developments regarding national identity. At the Seliger National Youth Forum in Russia, Vladimir Putin was asked a question about rising Kazakh nationalism and Eurasian integration, to which he said as part of his answer:

'I am convinced that a vast majority of the citizens of Kazakhstan favour stronger ties with Russia. [...] As you may know, Mr Nazarbayev is a very wise leader, I believe he is the wisest in the post-Soviet space, and he would never go against the will of his people [...] Nazarbayev has created a state on a territory where there has never been a state. The Kazakhs never had a state of their own, and he created it ... [the Eurasian Union] helps them stay within the so-called greater Russian-speaking world (*russkiy mir*), which is part of world civilisation.'¹¹¹

This 'chilly nationalist rhetoric' was read as a thinly veiled threat towards the territorial integrity of Kazakhstan and a warning that loosening ties with Russia would put the country at a disadvantage in the international arena.¹¹² These comments were made against the backdrop of a recently annexed Crimean Peninsula and an aggressive shift in Russia's foreign policy, and were not taken lightly by Nazarbayev. He was quick to respond and threatened to withdraw from the recently-established Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), seen by some as a tool to solidify and institutionalise Russia's resurgence

¹⁰⁹ "“Мәңгілік Ел” - мәңгілікке қалғандыққа Қазақстанның тәуелсіздігінің арман-мечтасы" [Mangilik-El: the centuries-old dream of an independent Kazakhstan]. *Ministry of Justice*, 7 August 2017.

<http://www.adilet.gov.kz/ru/leaflet/mngilik-el-mnogovekovaya-mechta-o-nezavisimosti-kazahstana>

¹¹⁰ Стратегия «Қазақстан-2050» [Strategy 'Kazakhstan-2050'], *Akorda*.

http://www.akorda.kz/ru/official_documents/strategies_and_programs

¹¹¹ 'Всероссийский молодёжный форум «Селигер-2014»' [Seliger National Youth Forum 2014]. *Kremlin*, 29 August 2014. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46507>

¹¹² 'Kazakhstan is latest Russian neighbour to feel Putin's chilly nationalist rhetoric.' *The Guardian*, 1 September 2014.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/01/kazakhstan-russian-neighbour-putin-chilly-nationalist-rhetoric>

in the post-Soviet space.¹¹³ A more detailed discussion follows in Chapter 4. Initially enthusiastic about the EEU, he commented that ‘Astana will never join an organisation of any form which presents any threat to its independent statehood’.¹¹⁴ Not uncoincidentally, 2015 saw the sudden celebration of the 550th anniversary of the Kazakh state. The MFA website claims that the Kazakh Khanate – founded in 1465 – marks the first independent state on Kazakh soil, not the Republic of Kazakhstan as Putin claimed. Under the heading ‘Why is Kazakhstan celebrating the anniversary?’, the importance of knowing one’s own history is stressed, as well as ‘further uniting the multi-ethnic population’ and ‘strengthening the identity and unity of the Kazakh people’.¹¹⁵ As part of the celebrations, music and theatre performances were given, monuments were unveiled to the ‘founders’ of Kazakhstan all across the country, and an epic Kazakh-language state-sponsored TV series was commissioned telling the history of the formation of the Khanate. This new national identity entrenched in history has become a key part of Nazarbayev’s rhetoric, in tandem with Kazakhstani values of tolerance and multilingualism. Importantly, this strengthened national identity is not rooted in mono-ethnicity as might have been expected in response to Putin’s comments. Nazarbayev, in a 2016 article for *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, lauded Kazakhstan’s uniqueness in diversity: ‘Multi-ethnicity is the greatest treasure that we share!’¹¹⁶ This was further emphasised in a 2018 article entitled ‘Seven Facets of the Great Steppe’ which lists important historical contributions made by Kazakhstanis. He writes: ‘[I]t is important to note that we are talking about the history of Kazakhstan, which is common to numerous ethnic groups who have been living on our territory for a long time. This is our common history, to which many prominent figures of different ethnicity have

¹¹³ Stratfor. ‘Eurasian Union Proposal Key Aspect of Putin’s Expected Presidency’ WikiLeaks Cable: [OS] Russia 111007, Global Intelligence Files, 6 October 2011. <https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/48/4820279-os-russia-111007-.html>

¹¹⁴ Sabyrbekov, Arslan. ‘Russian and Kazakhstan Leaders Exchange Worrying Statements.’ *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 17 September 2014. <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/field-reports/item/13050-russian-and-kazakh-leaders-exchange-worrying-statements.html>

¹¹⁵ 550-летие Казахского ханства [550th Anniversary of the Kazakh Khanate]. *MFA*, 14 April 2015. <http://mfa.kz/en/kuala-lumpur/content-view/550th-anniversary-of-the-kazakh-khanate>

¹¹⁶ Nazarbayev, Nursultan. ‘План нации – Путь к казахстанской мечте’ [The Nation’s plan – a path towards Kazakhstan’s dream]. *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, 6 January 2016. <http://personal.akorda.kz/ru/category/stati/plan-nacii-put-k-kazahstanskoi-mechte#list38>

contributed.’¹¹⁷ ‘Dividing a single nation by regions should become a thing of the past,’ he writes, ‘it is useful to know and take pride in the history of your region, but one should not forget that he or she belongs to a great nation.’¹¹⁸ This idea of an identity inclusive to all ethnicities is not new – it had been identified by Kolstø in 2000 – but is only now being realised in society.

The ‘intrinsically weak sense of self and statehood’ as described by Cummings in 2003, then, appears to have vanished: Nazarbayev is clear in his idea of a Kazakh identity and the strength of its claims to statehood. Cummings wrote that a ‘weak self-identity, while conducive to a multi-vector foreign policy, prevents a strong foreign policy direction.’¹¹⁹ It stands to reason that a stronger sense of self-identity might presuppose a stronger foreign policy direction, yet if so, this is unlikely to be towards Russia.

3.3. *The Rise of China and the Power of Public Opinion*

Astana and Beijing enjoy ongoing friendly and cooperative political and economic relations on numerous fronts, especially through the SCO and the BRI. However, an influx of Chinese workers in East Kazakhstan has been the source of tension in society and even caused widespread protests in 2016. Proposed changes to the Land Code which would have allowed foreigners to lease land for up to 25 years fuelled fears that Chinese investors were planning to come and buy up land. Protestors were quoted as saying: ‘We can’t give land to the Chinese. If they come, then they won’t leave!’ and ‘The fate of the land is the fate of the nation!’¹²⁰ Significantly, these protests were not localised in one city, or even in one area of the country; rather, they spread from the east to the south and to the Caspian in the west. Unlike earlier major protests, notably in

¹¹⁷ Nazarbayev, Nursultan. ‘Семь граней Великой степи’ [Seven Facets of the Great Steppe]. *Akorda.kz*, 21 November 2018. http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/akorda_news/press_conferences/statya-glavy-gosudarstva-sem-granei-velikoi-stepi

¹¹⁸ Nazarbayev, Nursultan. ‘Взгляд в будущее: модернизация общественного сознания’ [A Look to the Future: the Modernisation of Public Consciousness]. *Akorda.kz*, 12 April 2017. http://www.akorda.kz/en/events/akorda_news/press_conferences/course-towards-the-future-modernization-of-kazakhstans-identity

¹¹⁹ Cummings (2003), ‘Eurasian bridge,’ pp. 143-46

¹²⁰ ‘Kazakhstan’s land reform protests explained.’ *BBC*, 28 April 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36163103>; Lillis (2019), *Dark Shadows*, p. 172

2011 in the mining town of Zhanaozen, they were not met with violence, although many taking part were detained. Furthermore, as a result, a moratorium was imposed upon the law and the changes were not carried out: unusually for Kazakhstan, the protests were successful. The speed at which the government reacted to the protests, and the way in which it did, suggests that it, too, was also wary of the effects.

More recently, in early 2017 reports emerged from China about the negative treatment and detention of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and in the following months this spread to the ethnic Kazakhs living in the region.¹²¹ According to some, there is an ongoing attempt to systematically destroy the entire Uyghur Muslim community as thousands have been sent to detention camps and ancient religious sites destroyed. Conflict between indigenous Uyghurs and the 'colonising' Han Chinese is not a new phenomenon: Xinjiang has been a destination for internal migration from the eastern coast since the 19th century, and there are now almost equal numbers of Uyghur and Han; the Han are seen as non-indigenous colonisers by some Uyghur nationalists.¹²² But recent intensification of state-sponsored persecution against the Uyghurs has led Kazakhstan's eastern neighbour to be termed a 'bulldozer state', and new evidence suggests that over one million Uyghur and, crucially, Kazakh Muslims have been incarcerated, including prominent public figures. This figure is constantly on the rise. Ostensibly, this is a crackdown on the 'three evils' of extremism, separatism and terrorism, all of which the Uyghur minority is claimed to engage in; however, an official list of signs of extremism includes 'refusing cigarettes and alcohol, not watching television, and contacting people abroad', which are clearly not 'extremist' activities.¹²³

¹²¹ 'China carries out "mass detentions" of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang.' *Radio Free Asia*, 13 November 2017. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/kazaks-arrests-11132017130345.html>; 'Police in China's Xinjiang raid thousands of Muslim Kazakh homes.' *Radio Free Asia*, 16 November 2017.

<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/kazkhs-crackdown-11162017160701.html>

¹²² Gladney, Dru C. (1998). 'Internal Colonialism and the Uyghur Nationality: Chinese Nationalism and its Subaltern Subjects.' *Cemoti*, 25

¹²³ 'Carefully, Kazakhstan Confronts China About Kazakhs in Xinjiang Re-Education Camps.' *The Diplomat*, 14 June 2018.

<https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/carefully-kazakhstan-confronts-china-about-kazakhs-in-xinjiang-re-education-camps/>; 'Bulldozing mosques: the latest tactic in China's war against Uighur culture.' *The Guardian*, 7 April 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/07/bulldozing-mosques-china-war-uighur-culture-xinjiang>;

Beller-Hann, Idiko (2014). 'The Bulldozer State: Chinese Socialist Development in Xinjiang.' In Reeves, Madeline (2014) (ed.). *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia: Performing Politics*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), pp. 173-197

The 'three evils' are a key shared target of the SCO states, and with the global rise of Islamic extremism, this remains an area of strong cooperation between China and Kazakhstan. With this in mind, on the matter of Xinjiang Astana cannot afford to be too critical towards Beijing: it does not want to incur the wrath of a much larger and more populous country which is one of its most important economic partners. When reading official releases from the MFA, one gains an overwhelmingly positive impression of the Kazakh-Chinese relationship. The official line from both governments is that administrative issues cause the 'wrong people' (read: ethnic Kazakhs) to be arrested. As of March 2019, Kazakhstan had still not officially recognised the existence of the camps.

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And while Kazakhstan has raised the issue of Kazakhs being detained in Xinjiang through diplomatic channels, it has done so very cautiously and quietly, to the disappointment of the friends and family of those detained.¹²⁵ But these quiet requests have had some degree of success, as Beijing wants to retain a positive image in Kazakhstan. According to Phillippe Le Corre of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Beijing has 'anxiously' been trying to improve its image in Kazakhstan since the announcement of the BRI in 2013, opening 6 Confucius Institutes and providing more and more opportunities and stipends for Kazakhs to study in China. However, this may not be enough in the face of the situation in Xinjiang. Despite Kazakhstan's central role in the BRI, the local population remains largely negative about it: around 50% hold a negative opinion and a further 30% remain neutral on the issue.

¹²⁶ Historically in Kazakhstan, public opinion is often readily disregarded by the Kazakh elite, except, it appears, when it comes to China. The situation in Xinjiang has resonated particularly in the country and there are many loud and prominent voices in society, particularly on social media, calling for something to be done – voices the government cannot easily ignore. Astana still refuses to officially call out the Chinese government,

¹²⁴ 'Kazakhs won't be silenced on China's internment camps.' *Foreign Policy*, 4 March 2019.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/04/961387-concentrationcamps-china-xinjiang-internment-kazakh-muslim/>

¹²⁵ 'Carefully, Kazakhstan Confronts China About Kazakhs in Xinjiang Re-Education Camps.' *The Diplomat*, 14 June 2018.

<https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/carefully-kazakhstan-confronts-china-about-kazakhs-in-xinjiang-re-education-camps/>

¹²⁶ Le Corre, Philippe (2019). 'Kazakhs Wary of Chinese Embrace as BRI Gathers Steam.' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 28 February 2019

but diplomats are becoming increasingly active in their attempts to release detained Kazakhs. Public opinion towards China is in constant decline and Astana appears to be paying attention to this, which could impact Kazakh-Chinese relations.

This intricate bilateral relationship has acquired new complexity in recent years: public opinion is becoming more important and not so quickly ignored by the Kazakh leadership; political and economic necessity requires under-the-radar diplomacy in order to protect ethnic compatriots in Xinjiang, but this is underway and has resulted in the release of a number of prisoners; both countries seek to pander to the other, for different reasons; and, as will be discussed in the following chapter, the BRI has brought with it great economic advantages, but also much uncertainty about Chinese intentions in the region. It therefore appears unlikely that China will be the key focus of any stronger specific foreign policy direction.

3.4. Conclusion of Chapter

Cummings' logic suggests that, in light of a more focussed national identity, Kazakhstan may begin to have a stronger focus in its foreign policy, yet this seems unlikely. Economically, Russia and China are the two most important bilateral partners, yet there are difficulties in the political aspects of the relationships. As we shall see in the coming chapters, Kazakhstan looks to other partners for greater political and cultural cooperation, whilst remaining reliant on Russia and China economically.

Lots has changed domestically in Kazakhstan since 1991. The number of ethnic Kazakhs has risen while ethnic Russians are in constant decline, meaning that Nazarbayev had an ever smaller minority he had to respond to in order to avoid backlash from the Kremlin. It is possible that this backlash is simply a bogeyman, a niggling fear left over from the 1990s, but Putin's rhetoric and events such as the annexation of Crimea in 2014 ensure that Astana has reason to remain alert. If some are to be believed, Nazarbayev has always carried out policies aimed at disenfranchising the Russian population, in which case the developments of 2018 merely represent a continuation of this trend; however, it is known that alphabet change had been discussed but not carried out prior to 2018. The developments in national identity in the country are not sufficient in themselves to explain the motivations behind the

alphabet shift: a stronger Kazakhstani national identity in no way presupposes such a change. One might even argue that the use of Cyrillic should be entrenched in order to unite the two largest ethnic groups. Instead, switching to Latin for Kazakh and retaining the use of Cyrillic for Russian may actually serve to distance the two groups. In the east of the country, Chinese workers and repression across the border represent new sources of discontent. The government's promotion of a stronger national identity based on non-ethnic grounds in anticipation of greater economic development could also be helpful in setting us on the path to understanding why these policy changes were only recently undertaken. Kazakhstan's pursuit of its economic interests, which represent the main successes of a non-belligerent country's foreign policy, will be the focus of the next chapter.

4. Constraints and Choices

How Kazakhstan Responds to Russian and Chinese Economic Initiatives

Within Kazakhstan's economic relationships, two major developments took place in the 2010s. Firstly, in 2013 Xi Jinping announced the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Astana, under which Kazakhstan would be a main thoroughfare on the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), a large umbrella project financing infrastructure and investment to deepen trade and cultural connections between Europe and Asia along the route of the ancient Silk Road.¹²⁷ Secondly, 2015 saw the long-awaited establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) between Belarus, Russia, Armenia and Kazakhstan, later incorporating Kyrgyzstan, the culmination of a series of plans for a post-Soviet customs union and single economic space. These developments represent different but sometimes competing economic frameworks within which Kazakhstan finds itself at the end of the 2010s. As discussed in the previous chapter, they are each led by unignorable regional great powers who are potentially becoming politically less-desirable partners for the Kazakh elite. These great powers will be the focus of this chapter as they, along with the EU, are Kazakhstan's largest and most important economic partners and those which it cannot ignore.

4.1. A Bright Path to the Future: Kazakhstan's Economic Interests in the 2010s

In a relatively peaceful and unthreatening security environment, Kazakhstan's economic interests now take centre stage as its most important and pressing. Astana's economic goals are clearly laid out in the intermittent development strategies released by the government. The most recent are the Kazakhstan-2050 strategy from 2012, and the '*Nurly Zhol*' (Bright Path) domestic infrastructure strategy from 2015. The latter is a direct response to the BRI which highlights potential areas of cooperation. The overriding impetus for both of these strategies is to push Kazakhstan into the 21st

¹²⁷ The BRI was initially termed the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative, which remains in Russian parlance as 'Один пояс и один путь'.

century by turning it into one of the 30 most developed nations by 2050; projects under the *Nurly Zhol* strategy are also geared towards this end. The economic goals of Kazakhstan-2050 include privatising large swathes of agricultural land, streamlining the import/export process, attracting external anchor investors in various key fields, and the further integration of Kazakhstan into international transport and communication routes. The flagship project is the development of a financial hub in Astana – the Astana International Financial Centre (AIFC). This will be granted special constitutional status and will serve mainly as the financial centre for the CIS. Following the lead of Singapore and Hong Kong, it aims to join the top 20 financial centres in the world and will use English as its official language.¹²⁸ *Nurly Zhol* focuses on domestic infrastructure development and will boost the domestic economy by creating over 200,000 jobs, as well as modernise Kazakhstan’s transport and logistics infrastructure.¹²⁹ In doing so, it envisages Kazakhstan’s key role in the SREB. The BRI and EEU will be looked at in turn to see if and how they fit in with Kazakhstan’s economic goals.

4.2. *A Crucial Buckle: The Belt and Road Initiative*

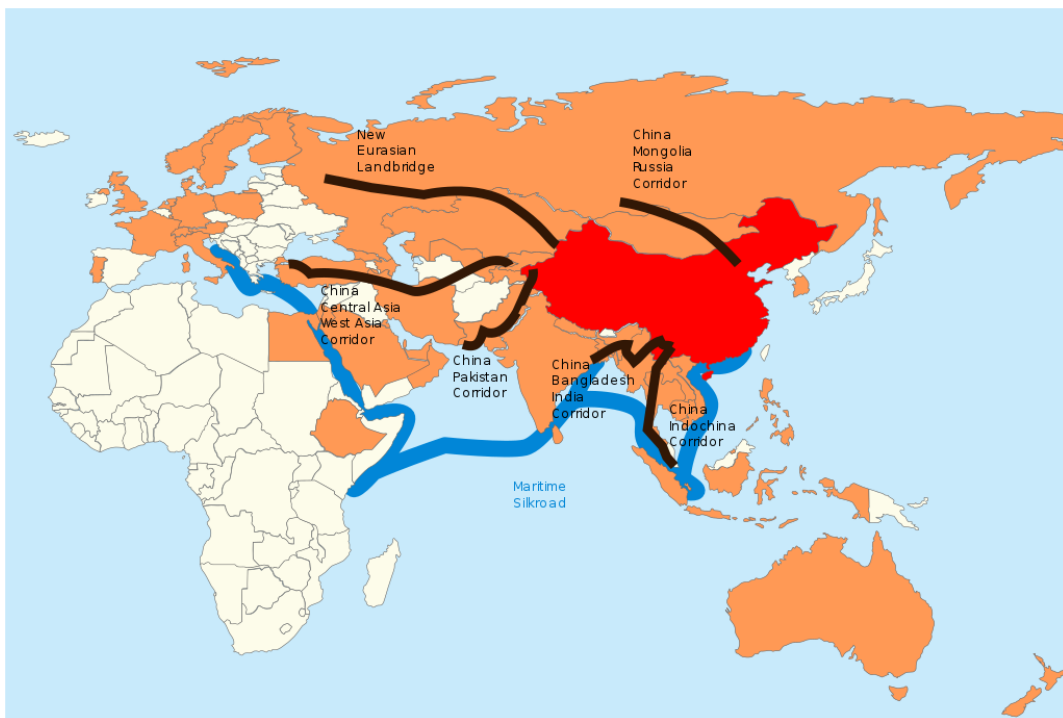
Beijing’s ambitious and wide-reaching BRI was announced at Nazarbayev University in Astana in September 2013. This simple fact speaks volumes about the crucial role of Kazakhstan in the initiative from China’s perspective: at least 68 countries encompassing around 65% of the world’s population are included in the initiative (see Map 4), and Kazakhstan was chosen as the place to announce it. Astana eagerly launched itself into cooperation with Beijing, as the two countries’ strategies line up. According to the Kazakh Minister of Investment and Development, both the BRI and Kazakhstan-2050 seek to create conditions for trade facilitation, smooth transit routes and the development of reliable transport and logistics infrastructure.¹³⁰ The SREB also represents tangible progress in Nazarbayev’s goal of becoming a bridge state between

¹²⁸ Стратегия «Казakhstan-2050» [Strategy ‘Kazakhstan-2050’], *Akorda*.
http://www.akorda.kz/ru/official_documents/strategies_and_programs

¹²⁹ Государственная программа инфраструктурного развития «Нурлы Жол» на 2015-2019 годы [State programme on infrastructure reform “Bright Path” for 2015-2019],
http://www.akorda.kz/ru/official_documents/strategies_and_programs

¹³⁰ ‘Integrating Kazakhstan Nurly Zhol and China’s Silk Road will benefit all, officials say’ *Astana Times*, 10 December 2016. <https://www.eureporter.co/frontpage/2016/12/10/integrating-Kazakhstan-nurly-zhol-chinas-silk-road-economic-belt-will-benefit-all-officials-say/>

Europe and Asia; at a 2017 BRI forum in Beijing he noted that Central Asia has become the ‘main bridge between the world’s largest markets’.¹³¹ As such, Kazakhstan has been eager to accept Chinese investment, and many *Nurly Zhol* initiatives are funded by Chinese capital – in total worth \$27 billion. From Kazakhstan, China has secured the natural resources it desperately needed to maintain its rapid economic growth of the 2010s. And although China’s growth has been reported to have slowed down, in October 2018 a five-year contract was signed between the two countries which will double exports of natural gas to China along the Central Asia-China pipeline, which became operational in 2014.¹³²



Map 4: The Belt and Road Initiative and its participating countries, 2017.¹³³

But in spite of all the talk and high-level meetings and fora, there remain hurdles along the way to fully trustworthy cooperation. Xinjiang is, according to some commentators, key to the whole of the BRI, which is probably why the Chinese

¹³¹ ‘Kazakh President attends One Belt, One Road forum, meets with leaders in China.’ *Astana Times*, 16 May 2017.

<https://astanatimes.com/2017/05/kazakh-president-attends-one-belt-one-road-forum-meets-with-leaders-in-china/>

¹³² ‘Central Asia Gassing Up China.’ *The Diplomat*, 7 November 2018.

<https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/central-asia-gassing-up-china/>

¹³³ <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:One-belt-one-road.svg>, accessed 10 June 2019. The SREB includes the New Eurasian Landbridge and the China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor.

government is so assertive in the region.¹³⁴ But as we have seen, this is a major bone of contention between Astana and Beijing. As long as tensions persist, Kazakhstan will remain somewhat distrusting and unsure of China's intentions, particularly as domestic unrest grows. And there remain further fears of inequality. Border crossings have seen significant development in recent years, such as that at Khorgos. There, a dry port, the Khorgos Gateway, has been established in order to increase rail transit. In the surrounding area on both sides of the border, huge shopping centres, outlets and even a theme park have been set up in anticipation of a massive influx of workers. From the Kazakh side, this influx is yet to manifest itself, but the Chinese side has already received significant state backing and is more well-populated, which fuels the already-increasing Sinophobia. Kazakhstan is struggling to find people willing to populate the new town of Nurkent erected nearby, despite offering free housing and benefits: as of January 2018, only 1,200 people were living there, with space for up to 100,000.¹³⁵ China dwarfs Kazakhstan when it comes to population density, and nowhere is this more obvious than at the Khorgos Gateway.

Nevertheless, as long as the gas keeps flowing eastwards and capital and goods flow westwards, relations are unlikely to worsen, and Kazakhstan can keep seeing itself as a crucial buckle in Beijing's belt. Astana continues to tiptoe around the Xinjiang issue, and it is in China's interests to keep Kazakhstan on side: the trade war with the US and potential geopolitical instability around the South China Sea make Kazakhstan a relatively secure and thus desirable economic partner. Between 2013 and 2018, there were eighteen meetings between Nazarbayev and Xi, including three official state visits to Astana which points towards the closeness of the two relationships.¹³⁶ Even after his resignation, Nazarbayev was a guest of honour at a BRI forum in Beijing in April 2019.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ 'China Says It's Building the New Silk Road.' *Time*, 12 May 2017.

<http://time.com/4776845/china-xi-jinping-belt-road-initiative-obor/>

¹³⁵ 'China's Ambitious New "Port": Landlocked Kazakhstan.' *The New York Times*, 1 January 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/01/world/asia/china-kazakhstan-silk-road.html>

¹³⁶ 'Kazakhstan and China: Strategic Partnership and Good-Neighbourliness.' *MFA*, 14 September 2018.

<http://mfa.gov.kz/en/content-view/shakhrat-nuryshev-kazakhstan-and-china-strategic-partnership-and-good-neighborliness>

¹³⁷ 'Первый Президент Казахстана встретился с Председателем Китайской Народной Республики Си Цзиньпином' [The First President of Kazakhstan met with the Chairman of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping]. *Akorda*, 28 April 2019. <http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/pervyi-prezident-kazahstana-vstretilsya-s-predsedatelem-kitaiskoi-narodnoi-respubliki-si-czinpinom>

Gordon G. Chang, a scholar unconvinced of China's rise, argues however, that Nazarbayev can only continue this political balancing act for so long. Firstly, it will eventually become politically unacceptable, from the perspective of other Islamic countries, for him to so deftly ignore the situation in Xinjiang. Secondly, China may have overestimated the lucrateness of rail travel, the main infrastructure being developed in Central Asia, especially in the face of melting ice caps and new sea routes across the Arctic. (Although for the time being, with tensions in the South China Sea, rail travel is the most desirable for Beijing despite its relative expense.) And finally, relations with China may have to be balanced with Kazakhstan's Eurasianist outlook and dreams of becoming the leader of the region, to be discussed in Chapter 5.¹³⁸ Nazarbayev cannot promote this if he is seen as constantly bowing to Beijing,¹³⁹ particularly if the trend towards responding to public opinion on matters concerning China continues. Furthermore, as the power of public opinion grows and the population becomes less afraid of protest, the domestic aspects of this issue grow in significance.

4.3. *A Double-Edged Sword: The Eurasian Economic Union*

The idea of an economic union in the former Soviet space has existed since the mid-1990s, but progress was slowed by the economic crises in this period. A number treaties and agreements designed to bring regional economic benefits were signed amongst post-Soviet states in the late-1990s and 2000s, but it was only between 2010-12 that tangible steps were taken to establish a customs union and a single market. In 2014 at Moscow's initiative, the official Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union was signed between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, which came into force on 1 January 2015. From the outset, Kazakhstan was explicit in its intentions. The First Deputy Prime Minister Bakhytzhan Sagintayev said at the signing ceremony: 'We are not creating a political organisation; we are forming a purely economic union [...] We don't

¹³⁸ Kazakh Eurasianism is not to be confused with the conservative, neo-imperial Russian Eurasianism perpetuated by scholars such as Alexander Dugin and defined by its anti-West and anti-globalisation outlook. Kazakh Eurasianism is based first and foremost on positive economic integration, rather than ideology.

¹³⁹ Chang, Gordon G. 'Kazakhstan is Moving Away From China.' *Hoover Institution*, 27 September 2018. <https://www.hoover.org/research/kazakhstan-moving-away-china>

meddle into what Russia is doing politically, and they can't tell us what foreign policy to pursue,' a statement significant in its directness.¹⁴⁰ Astana wished to remain distant from Russia's recent annexation of Crimea, and indeed, although one may have expected Kazakhstan to push for such a union, it was Moscow who accelerated the creation of the Union in the months leading up to it, seemingly threatened by both the economic might of the EU and the rapid rise of China. Almost immediately, Russia attempted to turn the EEU into a geopolitical instrument.¹⁴¹ Contrary to Astana's view, Moscow saw the EEU in direct opposition to the EU, and Ukraine became the battleground. In forcing Ukraine to choose between it and European integration, Moscow's actions clashed with Kazakhstan's multi-vector outlook and Nazarbayev's insistence that it would be anathema for any Eurasian union of states to compromise the sovereignty of its members.¹⁴² As noted in the previous chapter, Nazarbayev was quick to threaten withdrawal at any sign of Putin aspiring to actively expand the *russkiy mir* into Kazakhstan.

The signing of the treaty was a double-edged sword for Kazakhstan. On the one hand it ensured the continuation of good relations with Moscow and pacified the Kremlin so as to hopefully avoid a Ukraine-like scenario. But on the other hand, it left the Kazakh economy even more closely entwined with Russia's, as shown by the almost identical GDP graphs below (see Figure 3): the effects of the 2008 financial crisis are clear. As are Western sanctions and a worldwide fall in oil prices in 2014 that led to another financial crisis in Russia and the collapse of the rouble. As a result of joining the

¹⁴⁰ 'Russia and 2 Neighbours Form Economic Union That Has a Ukraine-Sized Hole.' *The New York Times*, 29 May 2014.

https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/30/world/europe/putin-signs-economic-alliance-with-presidents-of-kazakhstan-and-belarus.html?_r=0

¹⁴¹ Cadier, David (2015). 'Policies towards the Post-Soviet Space: The Eurasian Economic Union as an Attempt to Develop Russia's Structural Power?' In *Russian Foreign Policy: Ideas, Domestic Politics and External Relations*, edited by Margot Light & David Cadier (UK: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 169-73

¹⁴² Nazarbayev, Nursultan. 'Евразийский экономический союз: теория и реальность' [The Eurasian economic union: theory and reality]. *Izvestiya*, 19 March 2009.

<http://personal.akorda.kz/ru/category/stati/evraziiskii-ekonomicheskii-soyuz-teoriya-ili-realnost#list8>; Idem. 'Евразийский Союз: От идеи к истории будущего' [The Eurasian Union: From an idea to the history of the future]. *Izvestiya Kazakhstan*, 26 October 2011.

<http://personal.akorda.kz/ru/category/stati/evraziiskii-soyuz-ot-idei-k-istorii-budushchego#list15>

EEU, Kazakhstan was more likely to feel the effects of those sanctions; as Lillis writes, ‘when Russia sneezes, Kazakhstan catches a cold’.¹⁴³

Closer to home, and just like the BRI, the EEU was met with domestic protest on its inception. Critics lamented closer ties with Moscow – which they deemed indeed to be political, not just economic – as a return to the USSR, and a ‘new form of colonialism’ from Russia. Protests were held and placards read ‘Yesterday South Ossetia and Abkhazia, today Crimea, tomorrow north Kazakhstan!’, referencing Russia’s increasingly aggressive foreign policy.¹⁴⁴

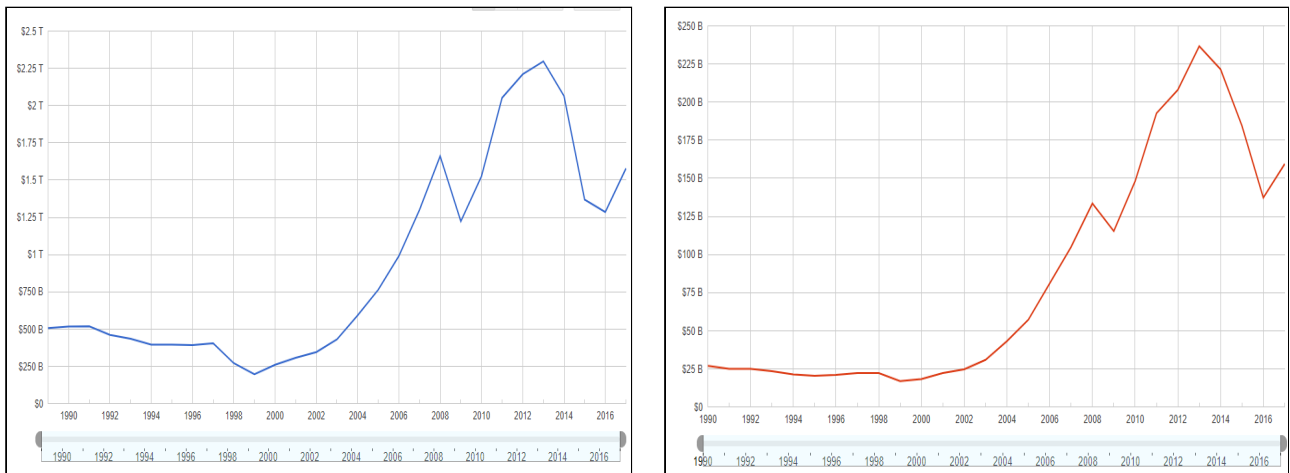


Figure 3: GDP of Kazakhstan (left) and Russia (right), 1990-2016.¹⁴⁵

The EEU was slow to provide any real economic or political benefits for its member states and seems to be too little and too late for Nazarbayev, who was already advocating such a union and increased Eurasian integration in 1994. Before the Union was established, a customs union and free trade area already existed; the EEU therefore does not really offer anything more other than plans for an eventual common currency – which Kazakhstan opposes – and the institutionalisation of Russia as the main regional centre of gravity. But nevertheless, articles penned in 2009 and 2011 see Nazarbayev

¹⁴³ Lillis (2019), *Dark Shadows*, p. 91

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 94

¹⁴⁵ Data obtained from <https://tinyurl.com/yx8fo8nr>, accessed 10 June 2019

still enthusiastic about the creation of a Eurasian Union.¹⁴⁶ The crisis in Ukraine seems to have had a large impact on feelings towards the Union, and already in 2015 Kazakhstan had begun to doubt the viability of the EEU.¹⁴⁷ Astana, however, had little option other than to sign the treaty, and fears of Russian intervention trumped fears of popular revolution as the government was unmoved by the protesters' placards.

4.4. *Conflict and Compatibility Between the BRI and the EEU*

The BRI and the EEU are fundamentally different on many levels. The BRI is the umbrella term for a series of infrastructure projects with no binding treaties or regulatory bodies. The EEU is an economic union with a number of regulatory bodies and binding agreements. Nevertheless, Clarke argued in 2015 that the SREB and EEU could emerge to be incompatible with one another, when in fact the opposite has happened. The SREB, he wrote, 'runs counter to Moscow's protectionist agenda within the rubric of the EEU'.¹⁴⁸ But Russia's attitude has changed in recent years, and an initially sceptical Moscow now shows eagerness in joining the BRI. Russia has realised that China will inevitably remain a key economic player in its backyard – Central Asia – and is keen not to be left out. Furthermore, with the dramatic downturn in Russia's (economic) relationship with the West in 2014, China has become a more important bilateral economic partner, with Putin often desperately seeking cooperation and attempting to convince Xi that Russia could be a key partner – Putin celebrated his birthday in 2013 with Xi, only publicly bringing it up in mid-2018 along with the added comment that Xi is the only foreign leader with whom he has ever celebrated his birthday.¹⁴⁹ As the SREB connects Asia with Western Europe, it could theoretically

¹⁴⁶ Nazarbayev, Nursultan. 'Евразийский экономический союз: теория и реальность' [The Eurasian economic union: theory and reality]. *Izvestiya*, 19 March 2009. <http://personal.akorda.kz/ru/category/stati/evraziiskii-ekonomicheskii-soyuz-teoriya-ili-realnost#list8>; Nazarbayev, Nursultan. 'Евразийский Союз: От идеи к истории будущего' [The Eurasian Union: From an idea to the history of the future]. *Izvestiya Kazakhstan*, 26 October 2011. <http://personal.akorda.kz/ru/category/stati/evraziiskii-soyuz-ot-idei-k-istorii-budushchego#list15>

¹⁴⁷ Clarke (2015), 'Kazakhstan's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy'

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ 'Why Xi Jinping's the man for me: Vladimir Putin highlight birthday party with "good friend" from China as sign of growing closeness.' *South China Morning Post*, 6 June 2018.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2149585/why-xis-man-me-putin-highlights-birthday-party-good>

bypass Russia. Moscow risked being isolated if it did not cooperate with Beijing, and Russia remains the junior partner. In the interests of increasing cooperation, Putin announced the highly aspirational Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) in 2016 which envisages closer collaboration between the EEU, CIS, China, India, Pakistan and Iran.¹⁵⁰ And now, the projects are beginning to be seen as complimentary by both Russian and Chinese academics and experts, and attitudes are changing: the SREB provides infrastructure and investment, while the EEU ensures necessary regional regulation.¹⁵¹ In this scenario, Kazakhstan can theoretically get the best of both worlds: the proposed economic benefits that come with being both a member of the EEU and a vital bilateral partner of China, without becoming embroiled in any great power games between the two countries. Additionally, Beijing and Moscow would not stand for the other attempting any form of destabilisation in Kazakhstan, for they both have important interests there. In this sense Astana can rest easy that its security situation with regard to Russia and China will remain stable for the foreseeable future.

4.5. *Less Controversy: The EU and the USA*

In many ways, Kazakhstan looks towards the West for inspiration to fulfil its economic goals. The AIFC will use English as its functioning language and its legal system will be based on the principles of English law. Interestingly, in the Kazakhstan-2050 strategy, the countrywide improvement of English is listed as an *economic* goal, which suggests that Astana sees English as important to economic success, perhaps further drawing on the experience of Hong Kong and Singapore.¹⁵² Access to Western knowledge, technology and investment is an important factor driving economic relations with the

¹⁵⁰ 'Пленарное заседание Петербургского международного экономического форума' [Plenary Session of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum]. *Kremlin*, 17 June 2016.

<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52178>

¹⁵¹ Timofeev, Ivan et al. (2017). 'Russia's Vision of the Belt and Road Initiative: From the Rivalry of the Great Powers to Forging a New Cooperation Model in Eurasia.' *China & World Economy*, 25:5, pp. 62-77; Rolland, Nadege (2019). 'A China-Russia Condominium over Eurasia.' *International Institute for Strategic Studies*

¹⁵² Стратегия «Казakhstan-2050» [Strategy 'Kazakhstan-2050'], *Akorda*.

http://www.akorda.kz/ru/official_documents/strategies_and_programs. Kazakhstan-2050 goals are categorised as follows: economic policy, social policy, the development of statehood and democracy, and the 'new Kazakhstani patriotism'.

EU, which are pushed mainly from the Kazakh side. If bilateral economic relations with EU countries are combined, the Union has been Kazakhstan's largest trade partner since 2002, and is a vital consumer of, above all, crude petroleum, which makes up 45% of Kazakhstan's exports and is the country's top exported product.¹⁵³ For its part, as of 2017 the EU was the largest provider of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Kazakhstan and has funded over 350 projects totalling \$180 million since 1991.¹⁵⁴ In its own words, the EU sees Kazakhstan as a 'crucial partner' owing to its 'strategic position' and as a 'supplier of hydrocarbon resources'.¹⁵⁵ From Kazakhstan's perspective, economic relations with the EU are an important source of regime legitimation, which is the most compelling aspect of this relationship for the current study. Chapter 6 will explore this dynamic in greater detail.

The USA represents a final economic powerhouse with interests in the region, although as will be shown in the following chapter, interest is waning. Washington has been a constant but not entirely significant bilateral trade partner – exports to the USA have constituted between 1.5% and 6% of all exports since the 1990s, with the figure in constant decline. Greater cooperation has been seen in the realms of security and denuclearisation, as was discussed in Chapter 2. Clarke writes that the 2014 drawdown from Afghanistan was an important turning point in US-Kazakh relations, which will be examined in the following chapter. Furthermore, Nazarbayev has criticised the USA's priority on security/political issues over economic ones in Russia and Iran, which have had negative effects on the Kazakh economy; he described the sanctions on Russia as 'barbaric'.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands are Kazakhstan's 4 largest bilateral trade partners in the EU. On average, crude petroleum makes up 81% of Kazakh exports to these countries, totalling \$8.44 billion in 2017. In contrast, Kazakhstan exported a mere \$850 million worth of crude petroleum to China, and just \$19.6 million to Russia. Data obtained from the Observatory of Economic Complexity.

¹⁵⁴ European Union External Action Service (2017). 'EU-Kazakhstan Relations.'

<https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/en/4076/EU-Kazakhstan%20relations>

¹⁵⁵ European Council on Foreign Relations (2016a). 'Eurasian integration: Caught between Russia and China.' https://www.ecfr.eu/article/essay_eurasian; Idem. (2016b). 'Kazakhstan: Perspectives on Eurasian integration.' https://www.ecfr.eu/article/essay_eurasian_integration_kazakhstan

¹⁵⁶ Patalakh, Artem (2018). 'Kazakhstan's EU Policies: A Critical Review of Underlying Motives and Enabling Factors.' *Asian Journal of German and European Studies*, 3:4, p. 3; 'Nazarbayev Calls US, EU Sanctions on Russia "Barbaric".' *Radio Free Europe*, 11 February 2015.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-russia-sanctions-us-eu-nazarbaev/26841705.html>

4.6. *Conclusion of Chapter*

Economically, Nazarbayev's goal for at least two decades has been successful economic modernisation through diversification of partners and industries, although China and Russia represent the two unchanging most important partners. 2019 sees Kazakhstan with a number of economic partners along all vectors of its foreign policy outlook. Astana was initially completely on board with the BRI, with one analyst for the European Council on Foreign Relations writing in 2016: 'The project has the highest possible political support; no disagreement within government is visible to the general public. There is consensus among policymakers that the project could boost the country's economic growth in the near future.'¹⁵⁷ And while the SREB has accomplished something that the EEU could not, namely ensuring Kazakhstan's status as a bridge country between Europe and Asia, the recent ethnic troubles in Xinjiang and resulting public outcry has led to a surge of Sinophobia in the country. Economic interests and domestic politics here come into conflict. In an almost unprecedented scenario for Kazakhstan, the government has begun listening to its critics. Although it remains to be seen what consequences this may have for economic relations with Beijing (likely minimal), it does mean that China is not simply the benevolent supplier of capital and infrastructure it once was deemed to be.

'It is virtually axiomatic,' writes Kremlinologist Andrew Kuchins, 'that when Russia behaves aggressively toward one of its neighbours, others in the neighbourhood get very nervous.'¹⁵⁸ This nervousness resulted in Kazakhstan's hesitant accession to the EEU, despite analysts having trouble finding either persuasive economic or political benefits of the move. But Russia is the source of 35% of Kazakhstan's imports, and so must be kept on side even if, politically, the two countries have diverged significantly. Kazakhstan prefers benevolence and friendly relations with its neighbours, in sharp contrast to the Russian aggression of the 2010s. Economic cooperation with the EU-27, as will be explored in more detail in Chapter 6, may become the most desirable for Kazakhstan in the future, as it is deemed to be the least threatening and the most secure. Clues in development strategies and speeches point towards Western norms and the

¹⁵⁷ European Council on Foreign Relations (2016a). 'Eurasian integration: Caught between Russia and China.' https://www.ecfr.eu/article/essay_eurasian

¹⁵⁸ Kuchins, Andrew C. (2015). 'Russia and the CIS in 2014: A Rather Bad Year.' *Asian Survey*, 55:1, p. 152

English language becoming increasingly important in how Kazakhstan perceives economic success in the 21st century. This could be an important clue when trying to understand the alphabet shift: the Latin alphabet would facilitate acquisition of English as a third – or even second – language. The present chapter has largely focussed on the great powers of China and Russia as they are the regional economic powerhouses. The following chapter will focus on the other vectors located in Kazakhstan's region that Nazarbayev has chosen to pursue in the 2010s.

5. Regional Relationships

The Rise of Turkic Central Asia

In Kazakhstan's region, relations with Beijing and Moscow are not the only ones Astana must pursue, although they may be the most important from a geopolitical point of view and are certainly unignorable. Kazakhstan borders the other Central Asian states of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and shares maritime borders with Iran and Azerbaijan in the Caspian Sea. These relationships were highlighted as the second most important by Nazarbayev in his 'Strategy' in 1992, although soon became overshadowed by partnerships along more powerful, more desirable, and less ignorable vectors. In recent years, however, cooperation between the Central Asian states has been growing in spite of their divergent post-Soviet trajectories. Furthermore, Turkey is just a relative hop, skip, and jump away and an important economic and cultural partner. In his final years as president, Nazarbayev made greater strides towards creating a common Turkic cultural identity. The Turkic factor also permeates and facilitates relations across Central Asia, and, as shown in Chapter 2, is one reason why Iran remains a less desirable port state than Turkey. Regional conflicts and threats are another important backdrop to certain bilateral relations. During the War on Terror, America was fighting in Kazakhstan's backyard and became much more regionally assertive, but the 2014 drawdown caused aspects of the relationship to fade, and the consequences are explored below.

5.1. A Vector Lost: The US Drawdown from Afghanistan

An important and often hegemonic presence in many regions, the economic effects of post-9/11 US attention on the Middle East and Central Asia were keenly felt, as were the implications of its drawdown from Afghanistan in 2014. A major reduction in on-the-ground troops, the closure of the Manas Air Base – the US' final Central Asian base in Kyrgyzstan – and a wider shift in interest to the Asia-Pacific led inevitably to a reduced interest in the region, despite the ongoing war in Afghanistan. Olcott had

described US interest in the region in the title of her 2005 book as 'Central Asia's Second Chance', albeit from a distinctly US (read: pro-democratisation) perspective. She concludes by saying that the US is hampered in its promotion of the development of democratic institutions by 'how little money it actually spends in the region on democracy-building activities'.¹⁵⁹ From the perspective of the Central Asian states, though, they had enjoyed increased FDI from the US, as well as some public diplomacy efforts (although Olcott deemed these more beneficial to the US than to Central Asia), with little pressure to democratise. Moreover, the US military in Afghanistan was a reassuring security presence for Central Asian leaders who were scared of instability spilling over their borders. With then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's announcement of the 'New Silk Road' infrastructure project in 2011, hopes were high that this would represent a more permanent economic and developmental interest in the region after the stabilisation of Afghanistan. However, a deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan meant that the project did not come to fruition, and became eclipsed by greater US interest in the Asia-Pacific: the 'Pivot to Asia' strategy was announced in 2012. It was this which prompted Clarke to write: 'Central Asian states that had benefitted from the US arrival on the regional stage after 9/11 faced declining US attention that presaged a restriction of the possible "vectors" for their diplomacy [...] On balance, the possible "vectors" for Kazakhstan's foreign policy in the coming years will be limited to a choice between a declining yet assertive Russia and a rising and increasingly confident China.'

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While the economic effects of this shift in interest were most acutely felt in Kyrgyzstan upon the closure of the Manas Air Base, the more pressing issue for Kazakhstan is based on security. Although Kazakhstan itself does not border Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan do; instability thus presents a threat to regional security, particularly during a time of greater regional cohesion as will be shown later in this chapter. President Trump announced his desire to further reduce the number of American troops in late 2018, which many senior military figures and

¹⁵⁹ Olcott (2005), *Central Asia's Second Chance*, p. 244

¹⁶⁰ Clarke (2015), 'Kazakhstan's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy'

analysts claimed would be detrimental to the security situation there.¹⁶¹ The United States Institute for Peace noted in May 2019: ‘The security situation [in Afghanistan] has worsened in recent years, with rates of civilian casualties reaching record highs in 2018.’¹⁶² While the risk of conflict reaching Central Asia is admittedly low, conflict resolution in Afghanistan featured heavily during Kazakhstan’s tenure in the United Nations Security Council, more on which in Chapter 6, with Astana having invested more than \$50 million in peace talks and educational programmes for Afghan citizens, as well as technical and humanitarian assistance.¹⁶³

The ‘loss’ of the US vector has not represented as significant a blow to Kazakhstan as some scholars have argued. To be sure, many of them are writing from a US perspective and see it as a blow to democratisation attempts. The economic benefits of US regional interest were not as pronounced as many, such as Olcott, anticipated; indeed the US largely followed its own interests. Had it been implemented, the ‘New Silk Road’ project would have involved redirecting Kazakh energy resources to South Asia, primarily India and Pakistan, which would have resulted in diplomatic boons for the US. But Kazakhstan did not necessarily need these markets for its resources: it would have been a redirection rather than an expansion of exports. In terms of security, Astana may indeed have felt more comfortable if the US maintained a military presence in the region, but closer cooperation and coordination between Central Asian states will help to ensure that instability remains unlikely to spill over into the region untargeted.

5.2. *Central Asia — Five States or One Region?*

As late as 2019, Central Asia was described as ‘one of the least integrated regions in the world’ due to its lack of exclusive regional organisations.¹⁶⁴ All organisations that the

¹⁶¹ ‘Planned drawdown in Afghanistan imperils US push for peace.’ *Reuters*, 21 December 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghanistan-military-analysis/planned-drawdown-in-afghanista-n-imperils-u-s-push-for-peace-idUSKCN1OK2EQ>

¹⁶² ‘The Current Situation in Afghanistan,’ *United States Institute of Peace*, 1 May 2019. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/05/current-situation-afghanistan>

¹⁶³ ‘FM Abdrakhmanov says Kazakhstan calls for Afghanistan peace talks to start sooner.’ *Astana Times*, 28 March 2018. <https://astanatimes.com/2018/03/fm-abdrakhmanov-says-kazakhstan-calls-for-afghan-peace-talks-to-start-sooner/>

¹⁶⁴ Vakulchuk, Roman & Overland, Indra (2019). ‘China’s Belt and Road Initiative through the Lens of Central Asia.’ In Fanny M. Cheung & Ying-yi Hong (eds). *Regional Connection under the Belt*

five Central Asian states are a part of also include third states, and there has been a distinct lack of regional summits between leaders, despite Nazarbayev's 2005 claim that 'the founding fathers of the European Union could only wish they had so much in common [as the Central Asian states]'.¹⁶⁵ Indeed, in a similar vein to a Eurasian Union, Nazarbayev proposed a Central Asian Union in 2005 to a muted response from the other leaders. However, 2018 and 2019 have seen greater regional cooperation amongst the five states, as evidenced by a leaders' summit held in Astana in March 2018. It was the first of its kind in over a decade – an 'informal' meeting took place in 2006¹⁶⁶ – and trade, regional security and closer cultural relations were on the agenda.¹⁶⁷ Before then, a significant obstruction to greater Central Asian cooperation had been Uzbek president Islam Karimov, proponent of a highly isolationist foreign policy. Like Nazarbayev, he was in power since the late 1980s. Relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were particularly tense, meaning that Kazakhstan had to pursue largely independent bilateral relations with these countries, as did the remaining Central Asian states. Karimov died in late 2016, ending his rule, and 2018 was declared the 'Year of Uzbekistan' in Kazakhstan, heralding a new era in bilateral relations with a year of cultural exchange, high-level diplomatic meetings and strengthened economic ties.¹⁶⁸ Subsequently, 2019 in Uzbekistan is the 'Year of Kazakhstan' which aims to continue the 'brotherly cooperation' shown in 2018.¹⁶⁹ The Astana-Tashkent bilateral relationship has been highlighted as one of the most important in the region, as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have the two strongest economies. Some Central Asian experts believe that closer

and Road Initiative. The prospects for Economic and Financial Cooperation. (London: Routledge), p. 116

¹⁶⁵ 'Kazakh President Proposes Central Asian Union on the EU Model.' *Turkish Weekly*, 23 February 2005. <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news.php?id=5255>

¹⁶⁶ 'В Астане состоялась неформальная встреча Глав государств Центральной Азии' [An informal meeting of Central Asian states took place in Astana], 1 September 2006.

<http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/v-astane-sostoyalas-neformalnaya-vstrecha-glav-gosudarstv-centralnoi-azii>

¹⁶⁷ 'Участие в Рабочей (консультативной) встрече глав государств Центральной Азии' [Participation in the Working (Consultative) Meeting of the Heads of Central Asian States], 15 March 2018.

http://www.akorda.kz/en/events/akorda_news/meetings_and_receptions/participation-in-the-working-consultative-meeting-of-the-heads-of-central-asian-states

¹⁶⁸ 'Год Узбекистана в Казахстане' [The Year of Uzbekistan in Kazakhstan]. *KazInform*.

<https://www.inform.kz/lenta/uzb/ru/>

¹⁶⁹ 'Год Казахстана открылся в Узбекистане' [The Year of Kazakhstan is Opened in Uzbekistan]. *Gazeta.uz*, 15 April 2019. <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2019/04/15/year/>

relations between the two countries could become the 'locomotive' that drives increased regional cooperation.¹⁷⁰

Accordingly, at the opening ceremony of the 'Year of Kazakhstan' in April, Tokayev noted that it should serve not only to strengthen bilateral relations, but to aid the formation of 'an atmosphere of cooperation and trust across the whole of Central Asia'.¹⁷¹ The 2018 leaders' summit, and a second planned for June 2019, are positive signs that cooperation in the region is indeed on the increase. The only potential bump in the road is Turkmenistan. President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov did not attend the 2018 meeting, prioritising bilateral talks in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, although the speaker of the Turkmen parliament – *de facto* number two – was present. Russian analysis suggests that Berdymukhamedov prefers the cultivation of bilateral relations and is opposed to joining a regional organisation, although the latter is no longer being advocated, even from the Kazakh side.¹⁷² However, the same analysis also claims that 2018 represents a positive turning point in the development of regional relations, highlighting the importance of a lack of third parties – especially Russia – during the talks. That such a claim comes from a pro-government Russian source is surprising, but perhaps points towards an indifference from the Kremlin, whose influence is likely to remain whatever the Central Asian leaders decide amongst themselves.

Regional analysis was also positive: Ruslan Izimov, head of the Institute of World Economics and Politics – a Kazakh government-sponsored think tank – called the summit 'groundbreaking'.¹⁷³ An Uzbek expert of regional relations said also that 'if Turkmenistan does not prepare any surprises, the 2019 meeting will truly be the first

¹⁷⁰ Paramonov, Vladimir (2019). 'Грани регионального сотрудничества: модернизация, идеологии, экономика и культура (опрос экспертов)' [Aspects of regional cooperation: modernisation, ideology, economy and culture (expert poll)]. *Central Asian Analytical Network*, <https://caanetwork.org/archives/15518>

¹⁷¹ 'Участие в церемонии открытия Года Казахстана в Узбекистане' [Participation in the Opening Ceremony of the Year of Kazakhstan in Uzbekistan], 15 April 2019. <http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/uchastie-v-ceremonii-otkrytiya-goda-kazahstana-v-uzbekistane>

¹⁷² 'Центральноазиатский саммит пройдет без России' [Central Asian summit takes place without Russia], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 15 March 2018. http://www.ng.ru/cis/2018-03-15/6_7190_sammit.html

¹⁷³ Muratalieva, Nargiza (2019). 'Навруз-2019. Как пройдет второй саммит глав государств Центральной Азии?' [Nowruz 2019. How will the second summit of the heads of Central Asian states go?]. *Central Asian Analytical Network*, <https://caa-network.org/archives/15797>

summit at which all five heads of state of the region take part'.¹⁷⁴ Trade in the region has shown a 35% increase in 2018 and is seen as part of the solution to two regional problems highlighted by Izimov: unstable domestic economic situations and the trend of increasing dependence on China.¹⁷⁵ Regional experts are certainly prone to hyperbole, but the positivity of their Russian counterparts does indeed point towards an optimistic situation in Central Asia. With regards to trade, visa-free travel and border demarcation, the 2018 summit had encouraging effects, and if Berdymukhamedov does attend this year's, it may be cause for yet another 'groundbreaking' meeting.

5.3. *Towards Cultural Turkism*

'Central Asia as a region is seeking self-identification,' noted a Kyrgyz expert in 2019.¹⁷⁶ Underpinning matters of identity in Central Asia and its wider region, which includes parts of the Caucasus and Xinjiang, is the historical Turkic connection. The eponymous languages of post-Soviet Central Asia all share a common Turkic root and are, to some extent, mutually intelligible (although the legacy of the USSR ensures that Russian remains the *lingua franca* for inter-ethnic communication and the language in which summits are carried out). Common cultural traits and religion have also historically united peoples in the region. Attempts to forge a 'pan-Turkic' identity in the early 20th century were met with fear and opposition from the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union, and the phrase has accordingly earned political and nationalistic connotations.¹⁷⁷ What Nazarbayev has been making steps towards in the late 2010s, then, I shall term 'cultural Turkism', understood as the strengthening of cultural (and sometimes economic) ties between Turkic states, but not aiming for political unity.

As discussed in Chapter 2, economic relations with Turkey have been important since the early 1990s, and especially in the 2000s as the country emerged as a crucial port state for Kazakh oil. Since then, volumes of trade have been steadily increasing, but cultural relations did not acquire specific importance until later in the 2010s. At various

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Horowitz, Maryanne Cline (2005). *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. (Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons), pp. 1712-14

times over the last five years, Nazarbayev has made reference to the region's shared Turkic cultural and linguistic history and has increased bilateral and multilateral cultural cooperation. The Turkic Council was established in 2009 between Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan but only in 2012 was the first summit on cultural cooperation held. Nazarbayev noted here that the study, preservation and passing-on of the Turkic heritage to future generations was a key task of the Council, as was creating a widely-understood concept of the '*tyurkskiy mir*', or Turkic world.¹⁷⁸ The lexical and semantic connection to the *russskiy mir* is clear and deliberate: this is a benevolent and voluntary classification rooted far deeper in history than the *russskiy mir*, which retains imperial and Soviet undertones. The long, shared history, identified as a new source of national identity, is also referred to in Nazarbayev's recent articles. In his 'Seven Facets of the Great Steppe' from 2018, for example, he writes:

'The Altai region is of great importance for the history of the Kazakhs and other Eurasian peoples. Since time immemorial these majestic mountains have not only adorned the lands of Kazakhstan, but were also the cradle of the Turkic people. It was here, in the middle of the first millennium, that the Turkic world was born.

'[T]he Turkic people managed to create both nomadic and settled civilisations, leading to the flourishing of medieval cities which became centres of the arts, sciences, and of global trade. For example ... in Turkestan, Khoja Ahmet Yassawi, one of the greatest spiritual leaders of the Turkic peoples, lived and worked.'¹⁷⁹

Turkestan, meaning 'home of the Turkish peoples', is a historic region encompassing areas of Central Asia and China. Map 5 below shows the rough area of Turkestan with modern state borders. In an obvious attempt to hark back to the cultural connectedness of the Turkic people in times gone by, a presidential decree signed in

¹⁷⁸ 'Сегодня Президент Республики Казахстан Нурсултан Назарбаев принял участие в работе Второго саммита Совета сотрудничества тюркоязычных государств' [Today President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev took part at the second summit of the Cooperation Council of Turkic States], 23 August 2012. http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/international_community/foreign_visits/segodnya-prezident-respubliki-kazahstan-nursultan-nazarbaev-prinyal-uchastie-v-rabote-vtorogo-sammita-soveta-sotrudnichestva-tyurkoyazychnyh-gosudarstv

¹⁷⁹ Nazarbayev, Nursultan. 'Семь граней Великой степи' [Seven Facets of the Great Steppe]. *Akorda.kz*, 21 November 2018. http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/akorda_news/press_conferences/statya-glavy-gosudarstva-sem-granei-velikoi-stepi; Yassawi is the earliest known poet to write in Turkic, as well as the founder of the first Turkic Sufi order.

June 2018 saw South Kazakhstan oblast renamed Turkestan oblast.¹⁸⁰ At the 6th Turkic Council Summit in the same year, Nazarbayev noted: ‘Turkestan has always been the centre of the Turkic world, spiritually and socially; my decree created Turkestan oblast and is turning the city of Turkestan into its historical centre.’¹⁸¹ Rhetoric surrounding the *tyurkskiy mir* has increased since 2012 and was especially evident at this summit, where he also made a point of highlighting the fact that a Latinised Kazakh alphabet will ‘bring closer the written language of the Turkic countries.’¹⁸² The above-quoted article also proposes launching an academic project entitled ‘The Turkic Civilisation: from its origins to the present day’ which will have its first conference in June 2019. This will be centred in Astana, and Kazakhstan will also oversee the creation of an online archive of Turkic works. Nazarbayev seems determined to make good on his claim that Turkestan ‘is not only the spiritual centre of our people, but also a sacred place for the entire Turkic world.’¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ ‘Публичное подписание Указа «О некоторых вопросах административно-территориального устройства Республики Казахстан»’ [Public signing of the decree: ‘On some matters of the administrative and territorial structure of the Republic of Kazakhstan’], 19 June 2018.

http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/akorda_news/akorda_other_events/publichnoe-podpisanie-ukaza-o-nekotoryh-voprosah-administrativno-territorialnogo-ustroistva-respubliki-kazahstan

¹⁸¹ ‘Меры по развитию сотрудничества тюркоязычных стран предложил Нурсултан Назарбаев’ [Nursultan Nazarbayev announced measures to develop cooperation between Turkic countries]. *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, 3 September 2018.

<https://www.kazpravda.kz/news/prezident2/meri-po-razvitiu-sotrudnichestva-turkoyazichnih-stran-pr-edlozhil-nursultan-nazarbaev>

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Nazarbayev, Nursultan. ‘Семь граней Великой степи’ [Seven Facets of the Great Steppe]. *Akorda.kz*, 21 November 2018.

http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/akorda_news/press_conferences/statya-glavy-gosudarstva-sem-granei-velikoi-stepi



Map 5: Turkestan with modern state borders and location of Turkestan Oblast.¹⁸⁴

Since Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came to power in Turkey in 2014, the heads of state of the two countries have held official state visits at least annually and regular telephone conversations. A wide-reaching new strategic partnership was agreed upon in 2015, promising greater cooperation in trade and regional security, and underscoring the countries' key role as Eurasian bridge states.¹⁸⁵ In 2018, after ostensibly extremely productive bilateral talks, Erdoğan referred to Nazarbayev as an '*aksakal*', a respectful term for elder, of the Turkic world.¹⁸⁶ During these talks, it was agreed to establish a number of Kazakh-Turkish cultural centres, primarily aimed at the youth. The younger generation is a key feature of Nazarbayev's promotion of the culture and history of the Turkish world. Not only must cultural centres be developed and preserved for them, he has also advocated a Turkic Youth Council for young future leaders which will serve to 'bring together our youth and deepen their knowledge of the cultural features of our

¹⁸⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkestan#/media/File:Turkestan.png>, accessed 10 June 2019

¹⁸⁵ 'Совместный брифинг по итогам переговоров президентов Республики Казахстан и Турецкой Республики' [Joint briefing on the outcomes of talks between the presidents of Kazakhstan and Turkey], 16 April 2015. http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/akorda_news/press_conferences/sovместnyi-brifing-po-itogam-peregovorov-prezidentov-respubliki-kazahstan-i-tureckoi-respubliki?q=%D1%8D%D1%80%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%B0%D0%BD

¹⁸⁶ 'Казахстан-Турция: в духе дружбы и стратегического партнерства' [Kazakhstan-Turkey: in the spirit of friendship and strategic partnership], *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, 14 September 2018. <https://kazpravda.kz/articles/view/kazahstan--turtsiya-v-duhe-druzhbi-i-strategicheskogo-partnerstva>

countries'.¹⁸⁷ He envisages a more culturally homogenous region not grounded in Russian or Soviet culture in which *positive* shared historical experience is key. Tokayev has continued this rhetoric since becoming President in March. A mere four days after taking over the position he visited the Ahmet Yesevi University in Turkestan and commented: 'Turkestan is the golden cradle of our state ... the centre of Kazakh culture, history and spirituality.' He went on to declare 2019 the 'Year of the Youth' in Kazakhstan.¹⁸⁸

In light of this greater cultural Turkic sentiment, the situation in Xinjiang becomes even more problematic for the Kazakhs and perhaps a reason why the government has reacted to its protesting citizens. Uighurs are part of the *tyurkskiy mir*, which appears to be becoming Kazakhstan's preferred categorisation of its neighbourhood and a basis for its identity. Astana cannot both support strengthening Turkic cultural cooperation and allow members of this group to be persecuted on ethnic, religious and cultural grounds, as indeed Chang claimed. This could become an important sticking point between the Chinese and Turkic vectors of Kazakh foreign policy.

5.4. Conclusion of Chapter

On the websites of the US State Department and the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs is written respectively: 'The United States, on December 25, 1991, was the first country to recognize Kazakhstan's independence'; and 'Turkey is the first country to recognise the independence of Kazakhstan'.¹⁸⁹ A 2018 *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* article documenting a meeting between Nazarbayev and Erdoğan writes: 'Turkey was the first

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ 'Встреча с общественностью города Туркестана' [Meeting with the public of the city of Turkestan], 23 March 2019.

http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/astana_kazakhstan/astana_other_events/vstrecha-s-obshchestvennost-yu-goroda-turkestana

¹⁸⁹ 'U.S. Relations With Kazakhstan: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet.' *U.S. Department of State*, 19 July 2018.

<https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-kazakhstan/>; 'Relations between Turkey and Kazakhstan.'

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey.

<http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-kazakhstan.en.mfa>

to recognize the sovereignty of Kazakhstan: Nursultan Nazarbayev recalled this fact during the visit, stressing that the Kazakh side does not forget such support.¹⁹⁰

Outside of its necessary relationships with Russia and China, this chapter has shown that Kazakhstan is more flexible in its other vectors. The US vector may indeed have become a dead end, but that does not mean that Kazakhstan is left with only two. Since then, the Central Asian and Turkic vectors have become more important and pronounced as Kazakh diplomacy has become more focussed on these areas. With a Turkic backdrop, Central Asia is now on the road to becoming more than just a geographic term, and Turkey has become a more important economic partner than the United States. Kazakhstan has demonstrated the flexibility of its foreign policy: it has far greater freedom to choose than many have given it credit for. As the above-quoted article reveals, it is clear where Kazakhstan's allegiance lies. One cannot imagine Tokayev asking President Trump so forcefully for regular high-level visits in 2019 as Nazarbayev asked of Obama in 2009. However, the statement from the State Department is an important indicator of the continuing legitimation accorded to Nazarbayev and Tokayev's regime, and indeed lesser US assertiveness in the region can actually have positive effects for Kazakhstan, both of which will be discussed further in the following chapter.

We see also that the shift to Latin has its roots, at least partially, in the Turkic experience. A majority of Turkic languages outside of Russia use the Latin script, including Azerbaijani, Crimean Tatar, Gagauz, Karakalpak, Turkmen, Uzbek, and Turkish itself. Increased cultural and economic cooperation between the Turkic countries is undoubtedly one reason for Astana to opt for the Latin alphabet. In doing so, it also highlights a disassociation with Russia; it is in part a symbolic gesture to the countries it wishes to be closer to (including the EU-27), and to those it does not.

6. Still A Success Story

Legitimation of Nazarbayev's Regime after 2010

¹⁹⁰ 'Казakhstan-Турция: в духе дружбы и стратегического партнерства' [Kazakhstan-Turkey: in the spirit of friendship and strategic partnership], *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, 14 September 2018. <https://kazpravda.kz/articles/view/kazahstan--turtsiya-v-duhe-druzhbi-i-strategicheskogo-partnerstva>

The legitimization of the Nazarbayev regime by, above all, Western governments and international organisations was one of the greatest successes of the President's pragmatism by the time of Kazakhstan's 2010 OSCE chairmanship. Yet that was by no means the end of his seeking international recognition and legitimization, and the 2010s have shown even greater victories for Nazarbayev's image both domestically and on the world stage. Not only did Kazakhstan secure a position on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for the period 2017-18, it now enjoys a well-established role as an international mediator of conflict and proponent of nuclear non-proliferation. But little has changed with regards to Kazakhstan's human rights issues. Kazakhstan remains decidedly 'not free' and heavily curtails freedom of speech, press, and assembly. The legitimization accorded to the Nazarbayev regime is nothing short of extraordinary, and heavily dependent on its natural resource wealth. Going forward, in light of Putin's comments in 2014 and the Kremlin's recent aggressive foreign policy, Russia could become a more dangerous player in this regard.

6.1. *International Mediator: Kazakhstan on the UNSC*

On 1 January 2017, Kazakhstan became the first Central Asian country to begin working on the UNSC. Its main priorities were the continuing fight against terrorism and extremism – especially in Afghanistan – and the pursuit of nuclear non-proliferation. Kazakhstan assumed chairmanship of various committees relating to these priorities, including those pursuant to Afghanistan, ISIL/Daesh/Al-Qaida, and Somalia/Eritrea.¹⁹¹ Nazarbayev has in recent years also been credited as an international mediator of conflict.¹⁹² After Turkey shot down a Russian plane in 2015, for example, he was

¹⁹¹ 'Членство Казахстана в Совете Безопасности ООН' [Kazakhstan's Membership on the UN Security Council], *Embassy of Kazakhstan in Georgia*, 5 February 2019.

<http://mfa.kz/ru/tbilisi/content-view/clenstvo-kazahstana-v-sovete-bezopasnosti-oon-2>

¹⁹² Malashenko, Alexey (2015). 'Nazarbayev as Mediator.' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 21 January 2015. <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/57771>; 'Nazarbayev the Mediator Sets Sights on Ukraine Crisis.' *The Diplomat*, 18 August 2016.

<https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/nazarbayev-the-mediator-sets-sights-on-ukraine-crisis/>; 'With Tensions High, Kazakhstan Plays Mediator in Syria Peace Talks.' *The Jamestown Foundation*, 20 March 2017. <https://jamestown.org/program/tensions-high-kazakhstan-plays-mediator-syria-peace-talks/>

instrumental in mending fences between Ankara and Moscow.¹⁹³ Astana was furthermore credited in the establishment of the Minsk Protocol, a 2014 attempt to stop the War in Donbass, as an ‘objective mediator’, and was the neutral venue for numerous peace talks between the Syrian government and opposition. This now quasi-institutionalised role would not have been possible without membership on the UNSC and has transformed Kazakhstan’s image of a neutral country into a country actively seeking to reduce conflict, limited success notwithstanding. This can only have positive effects for its international reputation. Indeed, Foreign Minister Atamkulov noted in his speech to the parliament on Kazakhstan’s UNSC tenure: ‘Our reputation as an honest and unbiased mediator has become one of the characteristic features of Kazakh diplomacy. This is clearly proved by the practical results of the Astana process to help resolve the situation in Syria.’¹⁹⁴ He concluded his remarks as follows: ‘In general, Kazakhstan's membership in the Security Council has strengthened our standing as an active and responsible international actor; consolidated international security cooperation, given new impetus to solving problems in our region, and allowed us to gain unique practical experience and bring the professionalism of Kazakh diplomacy to a new level.’ The following sections will explore the reasons behind the legitimation accorded to Nazarbayev’s regime and how Kazakhstan manages to uphold its reputation as a ‘responsible international actor’ despite the clear domestic issues in the country.

6.2. *The Continuing Power of Pragmatism*

Of course, the above achievements did not happen by chance; Nazarbayev worked hard to forge such an image of himself and his country, continuing his pragmatic policies in order to present the most positive picture of Kazakhstan as possible. Three key steps

¹⁹³ ‘What’s Kazakhstan’s Role in Calming Russia-Turkey Tensions?’ *The Diplomat*, 1 December 2015.

<https://thediplomat.com/2015/12/whats-kazakhstan-role-in-calming-russia-turkey-tensions/>

¹⁹⁴ ‘Министр иностранных дел Бейбут Атамкулов выступил с отчетом на правительственном часе в Мажилесе Парламента РК об основных итогах деятельности Казахстана в качестве непостоянного члена Совета Безопасности ООН’ [Remarks by Minister of Foreign Affairs Beibut Atamkulov at the Parliament of Kazakhstan on the main results of Kazakhstan’s activities as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council], 4 March 2019.

<http://www.mfa.gov.kz/en/content-view/syrtky-ister-ministri-bejbit-atamklov-kr-parlamenti-mzilisinde-tken-kimet-sagatta-kazakstanny-b-kauipsizdik-keesini-trakty-emes-msesi-retindegi-kyzmetini-negizgi-korytyndylary-turaly-esep-berdi>

Kazakhstan has made to this end are championing nuclear non-proliferation, distancing itself from Moscow, and the propagandic use of Western companies and diplomatic state visits.

Non-proliferation and denuclearisation is Kazakhstan's flagship 'benevolent cause', beginning in the 1990s with the swift removal of the Soviet nuclear arsenal. The UNSC represented a powerful platform for Nazarbayev to make his views on the matter heard to a wider international audience. Kazakhstan is not a benevolent state and hardly one to be setting examples, yet in the case of denuclearisation many states, especially the USA, have latched on to Kazakhstan's advocacy and cooperation, perhaps to justify their own economic relations with the country. Until the end of his rule, Nazarbayev remained extremely vocal on his commitment to a world free of nuclear weapons; rhetorically (and in actual fact), this was more important to him than the improvement of domestic human rights standards. More recently, the Kazakh elite has become noticeably more critical of Soviet nuclear policies. For example in 2016, the Foreign Minister commented that Kazakhstan was 'a victim for the Soviet Union's wider security [...] They used the local population as guinea pigs', referring to nuclear testing at Semipalatinsk.¹⁹⁵ Such rhetoric also contributes to the constant loosening of ties with Moscow and Kazakhstan's Soviet past.

Chapter 4 showed that Kazakhstan is pursuing closer economic relations with the EU, to which positive political relations are a key underlying factor. Patalakh writes that, from the EU's perspective, the promotion of stability in the region is more important than improving human rights in Kazakhstan, of which Astana is seemingly aware.¹⁹⁶ Hence there is a clear preference amongst the Kazakh elite to present the country as a model state in how it acts on the world stage than in how it treats its population. Kazakhstan's further distancing of itself from Russia in recent years is a key signal to Europe in this regard. As far back as 2008, Kazakhstan refused to recognise the independence of South Ossetia. In 2014, Astana did not show support for Moscow's annexation of Crimea, nor has it condoned Russian military action in Syria. Kazakhstan has taken an importantly neutral stance, prioritising regional stability over siding with

¹⁹⁵ Quoted in Lillis (2019), *Dark Shadows*, p. 238

¹⁹⁶ Palatakh, (2018), 'Kazakhstan's EU Policies', p. 14

belligerent forces in its neighbourhood. This has involved moving as far out of Russia's orbit as possible, more so in recent years as the Kremlin has pursued a more aggressive foreign policy and divisions between Russia and the West have widened. This is an indicator to the West that Astana should not be identified with Moscow's policies. To this end, shedding the 'Soviet image' is becoming increasingly important. In 2014 Nazarbayev suggested renaming the country 'Kazak Eli' so as to lose the -stan suffix, which he sees as having negative, post-Soviet connotations. This idea recently re-emerged in the Kazakh parliament to the derision of pro-government Russian press: *Komsomolskaya Pravda* wrote that such a change would likely lead to inter-ethnic violence such as in Moldova, Tajikistan and Chechnya.¹⁹⁷ This reaction is similar to the response to the alphabet shift, which would 'spark the degradation' of the country. Moreover, the shift to Latin itself can be seen within the context of de-Sovietisation. The Cyrillic alphabet was imposed under Stalin in 1940 and is a lingering reminder of Soviet Russification practices. As Kazakhstan moves further out of the *russkiy mir* and seeks greater cooperation with Europe and its Turkic neighbours, the alphabet change will be viewed from these partners as a positive signal.

Finally, Kazakhstan has at no small expense employed certain Western companies specifically in order to improve its international image, for example Tony Blair Associates, a consulting firm run by the former British Prime Minister, and BGR Gabara which was responsible for Kazakhstan's media image during its OSCE chairmanship. Evidence of doctoring Wikipedia articles and Google search optimisation to bury bad news was uncovered by journalists in 2012.¹⁹⁸ Nazarbayev, as has been mentioned, has also long sought high-level bilateral and multilateral meetings with key heads of state in order to increase his reputation. A book written in 2003 includes a 23-page photo gallery of Nazarbayev with leaders of countries as diverse as Pakistan, the UK, the USA, Japan, France, China, Turkey, and even the head of UNESCO.¹⁹⁹ This

¹⁹⁷ 'Казakhstan предложил переименовать' [Kazakhstan proposed renaming], *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 23 January 2019. <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26933.4/3983187/>; 'Kazakhstan MP suggests changing country's name.' *Eurasianet*, 24 January 2019.

<https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-mp-suggests-changing-countrys-name>

¹⁹⁸ 'Kazakhstan: Top-Notch PR Firms Help Brighten Astana's Image.' *Eurasianet*, 18 January 2012.

<https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-top-notch-pr-firms-help-brighten-astanas-image>

¹⁹⁹ Nazarbayev, Nursultan (2003). *На пороге XXI века* [On the eve of the 21st century].

<http://personal.akorda.kz/images/file/707d9efd9fd099ad3d296a5ad3d43699.pdf>

trend has continued; we saw in Chapter 2 that Nazarbayev was in pursuit of a meeting with Obama, which finally came to fruition in 2012 – along with the vital photo opportunity. And even if the US has become less assertive in Central Asia, Nazarbayev is still able to organise high-level meetings on the fringes of international organisations such as the UN, and managed to secure an invitation to Trump’s White House in early 2018.

6.3. *A Blessing in Disguise: Conditionality*

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the US drawdown resulted in a decreased assertiveness in the region. While this could have negative consequences for economic and security issues, it may in fact be a blessing in disguise when it comes to conditionality. Clarke, Olcott and Stronski, amongst others, have lamented the US’ ‘abandonment’ of Central Asia.²⁰⁰ Olcott wrote at length on this issue: according to her, the US has missed its chance to enforce any improvement of the human rights situation in the country, although she also criticised the US while it was active and assertive in the region. Going by Western norms this is clearly negative, but from the Kazakh government’s perspective, it is a dream come true. While most deals made with the EU and the US have historically involved minimal conditionality, Kazakhstan was forced to make some small legislative changes during its OSCE chairmanship and afterwards, ostensibly in order to improve certain domestic human rights and corruption issues to conform with OSCE standards. These have not, however, led to any significant change. Kazakhstan’s Freedom Score, for example, has not improved for the last 8 years, and repressive measures carried out against journalists in 2017 were condemned by the media representative of the OSCE.²⁰¹

But, significantly, this lack of domestic improvement has not resulted in a worsening of Astana’s foreign relations. Bilateral and multilateral relations remain positive across the board thanks to a combination of diplomatic success, natural resource wealth and the country’s ‘out of the way’ geographic location. Kazakhstan may

²⁰⁰ Olcott (2010), *Unfulfilled Promise*; Clarke (2015), ‘Kazakhstan’s Multi-vector Foreign Policy’; Stronski, Paul (2018b). ‘A Troubling Scenario for Kazakhstan.’ *American Enterprise Institute*. January 2018

²⁰¹ Lillis (2019), *Dark Shadows*, p. 256

not be a responsible domestic actor, but pragmatic diplomacy and the successful diversion of international attention has resulted in a reputation of a 'responsible international actor'. Western countries rely on oil and gas from the region and Kazakhstan is seen as the 'safest' partner, particularly thanks to this reputation. Moreover, regionally Kazakhstan enjoys the second highest Freedom Score of 22/100 after Kyrgyzstan's 37, and far greater natural resources. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have 9, 9, and 2 respectively, which could also play a role. In the coming years, Astana will likely be able to get away with making extremely limited improvements to its domestic situation and enjoying cooperative relationships with countries along all of its vectors.

6.4. Moscow as a Potential Hurdle

Since 2014, Russia has emerged as the greatest potential threat to Kazakh legitimacy. Putin's comments that 'the Kazakhs never had a state of their own' brought the Kazakh government's legitimacy and state sovereignty into question which, as we have seen, was not taken lightly by Nazarbayev. Paul Stronski pessimistically writes in his factsheet, 'A Troubling Scenario for Kazakhstan', that 'some Kazakhs are growing fearful that Moscow could eventually set its sights on Kazakhstan in the years to come.' In addition, he writes, 'most Kazakhs see Nazarbayev at key to the country's stability'.²⁰² Before Nazarbayev's resignation, the question of his succession busied the minds of many experts; his longevity, close personal ties with Putin and pragmatism were seen as integral to the very survival of Kazakhstan, and a lack of clear succession plan remained a worry. It is perhaps a positive sign that the transference of power was rather underwhelming, and little has changed in terms of Kazakhstan's policies, above all because Nazarbayev remains active behind the scenes. Nevertheless, there remains a fear that the Kremlin could exploit the opportunity to push for more influence in Kazakhstan, particularly in light of its recent aggressive foreign policy and Astana's refusal to cooperate with Moscow's war effort in Syria.

²⁰² Stronski, Paul (2018b). 'A Troubling Scenario for Kazakhstan.' *American Enterprise Institute*. January 2018, p. 2, 7

6.5. *Conclusion of Chapter*

This chapter has shown that pragmatism still pays dividends in Kazakhstan in terms of its wealth of bilateral and multilateral partners. A final push of de-Sovietisation is sending signs to the West that Kazakhstan is not to be associated with Russia's recent policies. The alphabet shift is an important signal, as is Kazakhstan's increasing role as an active mediator of international conflict. Continued pragmatic policies have ensured that Kazakhstan reaps the rewards of international legitimation in the form of cooperative political and economic relationships with a vast array of partners, without being forced to alter the authoritarian nature of the regime. Many scholars have noted the existence of an unwritten social contract in Kazakhstan in which the population accepts authoritarianism with little opposition in return for peace, stability and a relatively high income (compared with other Central Asian states).²⁰³ Whether this contract can be maintained going further, as the impermanence of oil and gas becomes more pronounced, is unclear. More concerning, perhaps, is the trend to present Kazakhstan as a benevolent country over actually improving domestic standards. Elections on June 9 were met with widespread protests in Astana and Almaty and hundreds were detained; according to the OSCE's observation report, the election was 'tarnished by clear violations of fundamental freedoms as well as pressure on critical voices'.²⁰⁴ Many had high hopes for a more democratic process, which were not fulfilled.

It appears, however, that for the time being Astana can bask in what is perhaps the greatest ongoing success of Nazarbayev's pragmatism. It further remains to be seen how Tokayev will ride this wave, but his courting of various partners since taking over the presidency points towards the fact that he, too, will be successful. In early April a trip to Russia constituted his first official visit abroad. He reassured Putin that there are no bilateral issues that cannot be solved, and that Kazakh-Russian relations are the benchmark for Astana's foreign relations.²⁰⁵ Days later, he welcomed Miroslav Lajčák,

²⁰³ Clarke (2015), 'Kazakhstan's Multi-vector Foreign Policy'; Patalakh (2018), 'Kazakhstan's EU Policies'

²⁰⁴ OSCE International Election Observation Mission. 'Republic of Kazakhstan – Early Presidential Election, 9 June 2019: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions.'
<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/422510?download=true>

²⁰⁵ Kazakhstan K.K. Tokayev and President of the Russian Federation V.V. Putin], 3 April 2019.

http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/international_community/foreign_other_events/sovместnoe-zayavleni

Chair of the OSCE, in Astana.²⁰⁶ His second state visit was to Uzbekistan where he furthered Nazarbayev's goal for closer Central Asian cooperation and took part in the 'Year of Kazakhstan' opening ceremony.²⁰⁷ He also met with the director of the AIFA, and the presidents of South Korea and Hungary before the end of April. Nazarbayev himself has not ceased diplomatic activity, and took part in an important BRI forum in Beijing at the end of April which included bilateral talks with his 'old friend' Xi.²⁰⁸

[e-prezidenta-respubliki-kazahstan-kktokaeva-i-prezidenta-rossiiskoi-federacii-vvputina](http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/international_community/foreign_other_events/sovместное_zayavlenie_prezidenta_respubliki_kazahstan_kktokaeva_i_prezidenta_rossiiskoi_federacii_vvputina); 'Совместное заявление Президента Республики Казахстан К.К. Токаева и Президента Российской Федерации В.В. Путина' [Joint Statement from President of the Republic of Kazakhstan K.K. Tokayev and President of the Russian Federation V.V. Putin], 3 April 2019. http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/international_community/foreign_other_events/sovместное_zayavlenie_prezidenta_respubliki_kazahstan_kktokaeva_i_prezidenta_rossiiskoi_federacii_vvputina

²⁰⁶ 'Встреча с Председателем Организации по безопасности и сотрудничеству в Европе Мирославом Лайчаком' [Meeting with the Chair of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe Miroslav Lajčák], 8 April 2019. http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/akorda_news/meetings_and_receptions/vstrecha-s-predsedatelem-org-anizacii-po-bezopasnosti-i-sotrudnichestvu-v-evrope-miroslavom-laichakom

²⁰⁷ 'Государственный визит в Республику Узбекистан' [State visit to the Republic of Uzbekistan], 14 April 2019. http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/international_community/foreign_visits/gosudarstvennyi-vizit-v-respubliku-uzbekistan-1

²⁰⁸ 'Первый Президент Казахстана встретился с Председателем Китайской Народной Республики Си Цзиньпином' [The First President of Kazakhstan met with the Chairman of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping], *Akorda*, 28 April 2019. <http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/pervyi-prezident-kazahstana-vstretilsya-s-predsedatelem-kitaiskoi-na-rodnoi-respubliki-si-czinpinom>

7. Identity, Modernisation, and the Soviet Legacy

Conclusion

Kazakhstan's recent language policy has clear roots in its foreign policy. Two important and linked factors which have motivated the alphabet shift and driven Kazakh foreign policy in the 2010s are economic modernisation and the links to the *tyurkskiy mir*. Nazarbayev saw a strong national identity as a crucial basis for the economic modernisation necessary to push Kazakhstan into the 21st century, an opinion Tokayev shares. It was not a mere passing comment when Nazarbayev referred to this century as 'the Turkic century', and a common Turkic history has been pushed to the forefront of Kazakhstani national identity. Economic modernisation has involved the continuation of strong trade links with Russia, enthusiastic taking-part in Chinese-led BRI initiatives, largely based on improving transport infrastructure in the country in anticipation of a more practical status as a Eurasian bridge, and closer ties with the EU. With the unfortunate situation in Xinjiang, China is becoming a less desirable partner, and Kazakhstan appears to be leaning westwards. The flagship project of the late 2010s is the Astana International Financial Centre, which is based on British legal norms and will use English as its functioning language. The alphabet shift is a clear signal to Europe of Kazakhstan's intentions and priorities, as it is to Turkey and the Central Asian countries using the Latin alphabet. Kazakhstan sees the future success and development of its economy at least partially rooted in the West, which will remain the case as long as conditionality remains weak, which is likely. Culturally it wants to cement itself in the *tyurkskiy mir*, the rhetoric surrounding the 'new' Turkestan region being a crucial signpost for this.

All of this points towards the fact that multi-vectorism in Kazakhstan is very much alive and well, contrary to what some scholars may have claimed in recent years, and despite logic that a stronger sense of national identity would presuppose a stronger foreign policy direction.²⁰⁹ Russia and China are inevitable vectors and cannot be

²⁰⁹ Ambrosio, Thomas & Lange, William A. (2014). 'Mapping Kazakhstan's geopolitical code: an analysis of Nazarbayev's presidential addresses, 1997-2014.' *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 55: 5; Clarke (2015), 'Kazakhstan's Multi-vector Foreign Policy'; Cummings (2003), 'Eurasian bridge'

ignored: Russian culture and the influence of its economy will always matter in Kazakhstan; similarly, the economic benefits of close ties to Beijing cannot be squandered. However, the 2010s have seen the strengthening of the European and Turkic/Central Asian vectors, and the weakening of the American vector. This shows that the pragmatism that defined the first two decades of Nazarbayev's rule is also going strong and bringing success. If his first few weeks in office are anything to go by, Tokayev appears to be carrying on the pragmatic tradition, though this is not to say that continuing to pursue multi-vectorism is all smooth sailing. There are potential areas of conflict between the Chinese and Turkic vectors which are represented by the situation in Xinjiang. Moscow is also not an entirely desirable partner as its foreign policy becomes more aggressive, but Astana has no choice but to keep it on side. It remains to be seen if the Kremlin will exploit Nazarbayev's departure for its own gains. Finally, domestic protesters are a constant source of irritation for the Kazakh political elite. As of yet, the government has only listened to them on matters concerning China, perhaps where the elite shares the worries of the populace, but the domestic situation may eventually become unacceptable, forcing the government to respond. These will be areas of interest in the coming years for students and researchers of Kazakhstan and Central Asia.

There is a third and final factor which was also undoubtedly a consideration when deciding on the alphabet shift, namely the Soviet factor. In the late 2010s, the elite in Astana has become increasingly critical of the Soviet Union and its policies. In 2017, for example, Nazarbayev wrote: 'the 20th century was tragic and terrible, agony for our people [...] The Kazakh language and culture were devastated [...] No one has the right to impose their will on someone else.'²¹⁰ The institutionalisation of the Cyrillic alphabet from 1940 onwards was but one factor in the 'devastation' of the Kazakh language. The 2010s are a time in which Kazakhstan is forging a new identity, which almost certainly involves further distancing from Moscow, especially in the wake of the 2014 Ukraine crisis. The policy is, then, not wholly anti-Russian as was initially assumed, but also has

²¹⁰ Nazarbayev, Nursultan. 'Болашаққа бағдар: рухани жаңғыру' [Orientation for the future: spiritual revival]. *Egemen Qazaqstan*, 28 June 2017. <http://personal.akorda.kz/kz/category/makalalary/bolashakka-bagdar-ruhani-zhangyru-1#list40>

an anti-Soviet element. This further ties in with signalling to the West that Astana is not to be associated with the Kremlin's policies.

Kazakhstan wants to launch itself into the 21st century, develop its economy and society, and become one of the 30 most developed countries in the world. A vital step towards this goal is shaking off the last of the Soviet shackles, which went one step further in March 2019 with the resignation of Nazarbayev, the last remaining Soviet leader in Central Asia. To this end, the alphabet shift kills three birds with one stone: it follows the elite's perception of the West being crucial to economic modernisation in the 21st century and sends an important signal in that direction; it reinforces links with the Turkic world, forming the basis of a national identity which is perceived as a crucial basis for this economic modernisation; and it represents a break with Kazakhstan's Soviet past, a move which will undoubtedly presuppose sustained legitimisation of the regime from the West for the foreseeable future.

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