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Ethnic Divisions and Ensuring Stability in Kazakhstan: A Guide for U.S. Policy

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Executive Summary

This brief assesses ethnic divisions in Kazakhstan, analyzes the potential risks of ethnic and geopolitical tension and makes recommendations for U.S. policy. Kazakhstan's current approach to managing its internal divides and overall stability is assessed and drivers of potential risk are evaluated.

Due to renewed cold war tensions with China and Russia, the United States must resist any temptation to become involved in Kazakhstan's internal politics and refrain from any efforts to sway Kazakhstan to ally itself with the West. This would only cause internal instability and hostile relations with its neighbors, Russia and China. Given Kazakhstan's potential for domestic strife, U.S. interests are best served by a restrained approach to the country that better preserves its internal and external stability.

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Kazakhstan's vast land mass and sparse population leave the country vulnerable to potential external threats. Kazakhstan borders Russia and China, its strongest security and economic partners respectively. These two powers are very close while the United States is far and consequently plays a relatively minor role in the country. The United States can and should, however, engage economically with Kazakhstan to support its development.

The United States should:

- Refrain from attempting to sway Kazakhstan to align with the West amid renewed East–West tensions;
- Refrain from getting involved in any potential ethnic disputes or separatist sentiment in Kazakhstan;
- Aid Kazakhstan in its attempts at political and economic reform without expecting or demanding rapid change;
- Increase economic cooperation and investment in the country in the energy sector and beyond to help the country develop and diversify its economy and trading partners. U.S. businesses should be encouraged to compete in the country on a commercial basis, but the U.S. government should avoid using them as a proxy for zero–sum geopolitical competition with China and Russia.

Introduction

Despite its large Russian minority, Kazakhstan has managed to avoid major ethnic tensions in the post–Soviet era. This has been due largely to the government’s support for a multi–ethnic state and its embrace of a pragmatic multi–vector foreign policy that has allowed it to maintain good relations with Russia while defending Kazakhstan’s independence. However, tensions could escalate. This brief analyzes the potential and drivers of this trajectory and assesses the Kazakh approach to managing its internal divides and other areas of potential instability. It concludes with recommendations on the appropriate U.S. policy toward the Central Asian nation.¹

Identity in Kazakhstan is mainly divided along ethnic lines, primarily between ethnic Kazakhs and Russians. The civic concept of national identity, or the idea of a multiethnic “Kazakhstani” nation, derived from Soviet tradition, finds more acceptance with ethnic minorities (and neighboring Russia) than with the Kazakh majority. Most

¹ The author conducted 25 interviews with prominent community leaders and influential establishment figures in Almaty, Kazakhstan for this brief. Kazakhstani university professors, journalists, businessmen and analysts from Kazakh, Russian, Uyghur, and Korean ethnic backgrounds were interviewed.

ethnic Kazakhs believe the country's identity should be conceptualized around a "Kazakh" nation and that ethnic minorities should be expected to assimilate.

Assimilation would require the use of Kazakh in public spaces and as a dominant language — which, due to Kazakhstan's history, is not currently the case. As in large parts of the former British and French empires, Russian, as the previous imperial language, remains the lingua franca. The country's ruling elite understands the popularity of ethnic nationalism, but also remains influenced by the legacy of Soviet culture and fears ethnic conflict. Because of this, the ruling elite, descended from the Russian-speaking Kazakh Communist Party elites, uses a dual approach to identity-related issues, balancing the interests of ethnic nationalist lobbies with their own more civic form of nationalism.

Limits on ethnic nationalism will remain a fundamental contributing factor to maintaining stability in Kazakhstan as well as with neighboring Russia and China.

However, the country's demographic evolution suggests that the ethnic Russian minority (by far the largest minority group) will continue to shrink, and the Kazakh majority will continue to grow — a trend that will likely diminish the civic concept of identity. But in the meantime, limits on ethnic nationalism will remain a fundamental contributing factor to maintaining stability in Kazakhstan as well as with neighboring Russia and China.

With the Russian Federation's long standing claim to protect ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in the former Soviet Union — most recently a major pretext for the invasion of Ukraine — anxiety about a potential Russian intervention in the Russian-inhabited regions of Kazakhstan has increased. However, while separatist sentiment was fairly prominent in these regions in the 1990s after the breakup of the

Soviet Union, today there is no real indication of any organized separatist movement; nor has the Russian government shown any desire to attack and break up Kazakhstan.

Interviewees said that the risk of inter-ethnic conflict in the first decade of independence was mitigated by Kazakhstan's language policy, which – unlike in Ukraine and the Baltic States, which also have large Russian minorities – constitutionally recognized Russian as an official language.² Additionally, political parties based on ethnicity are banned in Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy towards Russia, China, and the United States prioritizes positive, pragmatic relations with important powers, especially its much larger immediate neighbors. Ensuring the equality of the Russian ethnic minority is a pragmatic approach to managing the country's diversity and to avoiding tensions with the Kremlin. Abstaining from denunciations of Chinese repression in Xinjiang is also emblematic of this approach to neighboring great powers, as is Kazakhstan's avoidance of military or political alignment with the West.

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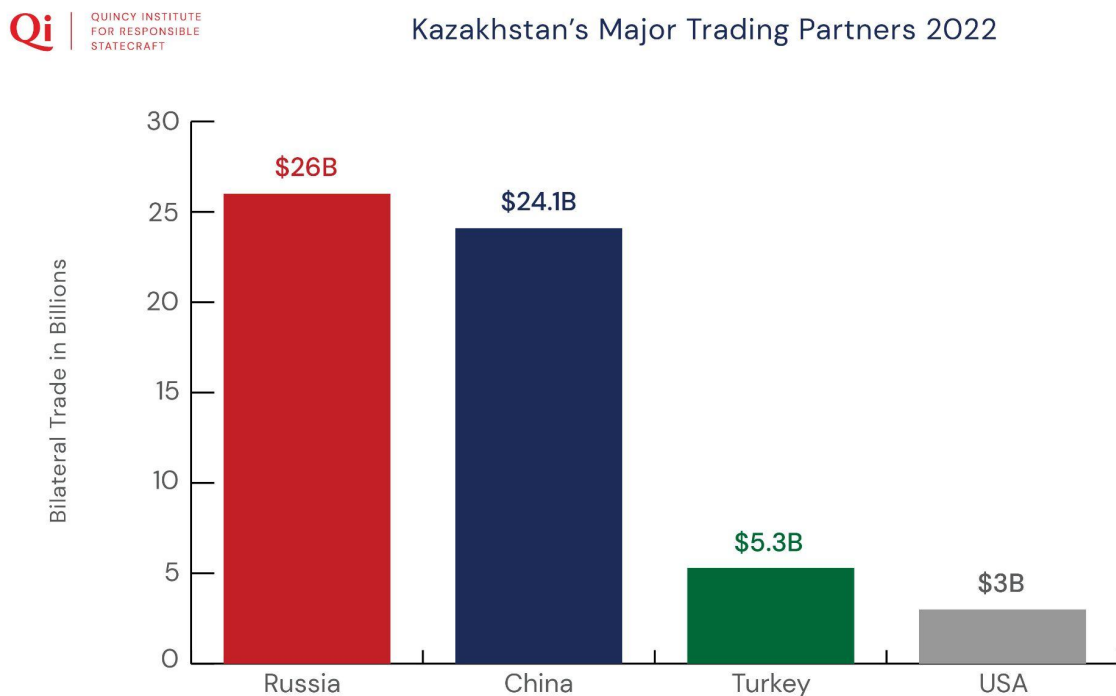
Because of Kazakhstan's pragmatic multi-vector foreign policy, interviewees said that most people in Kazakhstan do not see a Russian invasion of their country as likely. Russia is perceived as having little motivation to invade a country that does not challenge its interests and with which relations are good. Interviewees also believed that any invasion of Kazakhstan would run counter to Chinese interests in the country and that this would further dissuade Russia, given current Sino-Russian relations.

Russia and China practice a great power entente in the region and respect each other's interests. Both are hostile to a greater role for the United States in Central Asia, and fear

² "Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Article 7." *Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan*. 2015. <http://www.parlam.kz/en/constitution>.

a possible spread of Islamist extremism. Beijing focuses on economic issues and defers to Moscow on security and political matters. In turn, Moscow does not oppose China enjoying a greater share of Kazakh energy resources. The two giants engage Central Asia in part through joint regional organizations including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the security sphere, which supports cooperation on areas of mutual concern such as terrorism, separatism, and jihadism in the region. China is deeply involved in Kazakhstan through the Belt and Road Initiative, with two out of six economic corridors of BRI passing through Kazakhstan to connect China with Europe, Iran, and western Asia.³

Figure 1: Kazakhstan’s Major Trading Partners



Overall, Kazakhstan’s foreign policy has allowed it to retain cooperative relations with China, Russia, and the United States, and offers the potential for the country to continue

³ Bakhut Tukulov, Dinara Otegen, and Dilbar Kassymova, “Kazakhstan CRD – The Belt and Road Initiative,” CDR News, September 21, 2021, <https://www.cdr-news.com/cdr-essential-intelligence/1100-cdr-the-belt-and-road-initiative-2021/kazakhstan#:~:text=Kazakhstan%20is%20geographically%20ideal%20for,Europe%2C%20Iran%20and%20Western%20Asia.>

to diversify and develop its economy. The United States has minimal political influence in Kazakhstan and ranks far below China and Russia in terms of the country's trading partners (see Figure 1 above), although it does have significant in-country energy investments. In light of this, the United States should prioritize economic support and soft power efforts to aid the country's development and reform, as it mostly already does, from becoming politically or militarily involved in Kazakhstan's domestic affairs.

The United States should prioritize economic support and soft power efforts to aid the country's development.

During the January 2022 events in Kazakhstan, a series of violent protests erupted after a steep rise in energy prices, resulting in the deaths of 231 people. Current President Kassym-Jomart Tokaev's request to have the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) step in and provide security assistance demonstrates who the preferred partner is for Kazakhstan in the event of domestic turmoil. The CSTO's presence bolstered the government and strengthened Tokayev's hand in moving to exclude the previously dominant clans of former President Nursultan Nazarbayev from power. This demonstrates the extent to which Russian and Kazakhi politics are linked. The Biden administration rightly refrained from involving the United States in this crisis.

Ethnic divides in Kazakhstan

In the Soviet referendum of March 1991, the Central Asian republics voted in favor of preserving the Soviet Union, but following the failed coup in Moscow later that year, all eventually declared independence. These nations thus achieved independence without having necessarily sought it. During Soviet times, the socialist cause, Soviet culture and the Russian language helped mold a shared identity across Soviet republics and ethnic groups, the influence of which still lingers.

Because of Stalin’s mass deportation of Russians, Ukrainians, and others to Kazakhstan, and Khrushchev’s settlement of hundreds of thousands of Russian and Ukrainian farmers as part of the Virgin Lands Campaign, Kazakhstan’s population was highly multi-ethnic when it became independent in 1992.⁴ Just before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 1989 census showed that ethnic Russians had just started to lose their plurality in Kazakhstan, forming 37.8 percent of the population, with Kazakhs at 39.7 percent.⁵ Sharing the nation between ethnic Russians, Kazakhs, and other ethnic minorities became an essential part of Nursultan Nazarbaev’s nation building project.

After Kazakhstan became independent, existing Communist Party elites continued to run the country under Nazarbaev, who had been the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, thereby perpetuating old Soviet power structures. Though stable, this form of governance also featured high levels of rent-seeking and corruption.

Nazarbaev’s legacy includes a number of accomplishments, such as the preservation of good relations with Kazakhstan’s neighbors and with Western countries. He managed to attract significant foreign oil investments and adopted a policy of ethnic tolerance to manage Kazakhstan’s multiethnic society. In 2004, the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan proposed a doctrine of National Unity (“Kazakhstani Nation”) involving a civic form of nationalism to unify the country’s 140 ethnic groups.⁶ While this ideology is popular with minorities, Kazakh nationalists complain it is pursued at the expense of the majority.⁷

⁴ Alexey Timofeychev, “Virgin Lands Campaign: How the Soviet Union Tried to Counter Food Shortages,” *Russia Beyond*, August 16 2017, https://www.rbth.com/multimedia/history/2017/08/16/virgin-lands-campaign-how-the-ussr-tried-to-counter-food-shortages_823652; Lazzat Dinashева and Mirzahan Egamberdiyev, “Forced Deportation of People in Kazakhstan,” *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 131 (2014), 300-313, <https://pdf.sciencedirectassets.com/277811/1-s2.0-S1877042814X00273/1-s2.0-S1877042814030304/main.pdf?>

⁵ Paul Goble, “New Wave of Kazakh Nationalism Changing Astana’s Domestic and Foreign Policies,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 16, no. 32 (March 7, 2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/new-wave-of-kazakh-nationalism-changing-astanas-domestic-and-foreign-policies/>.

⁶ “Youth of Kazakhstan should ensure interethnic harmony – Nazarbayev,” *Tengri News*, November 11, 2014, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/molodej-kazahstana-doljna-obespechit-mejnatsionalnoe-265003/.

⁷ “Kazakhstan: Local Ethnic Conflict Exposes National Fault Lines,” *Refworld*, February 11, 2015, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/551017ee4.html>.

President Tokayev won the presidential election in June 2019, ending Nazarbaev's 30-year personal rule and displacing his immediate family from power. However, Tokayev is also a product of Nazarbaev's regime and perpetuates many of his policies, signaling the continuation of difficult to penetrate power structures. The political elite control a large percentage of Kazakhstan's economy, including business assets and the national sovereign wealth fund.

Kazakhstanis have expressed frustrations with this status quo. "Old men go away" was one of the slogans of the violent protests that erupted in 2022. Economic discontent was linked to anger at the lack of free and fair elections. According to a national poll, only 52 percent of the population believe elections can be trusted.⁸

Interview subjects said this event could have been a clash between the old clans that dominated the government under Nazarbaev, and the new President, who sought to consolidate his own power and remove the influence of older clans.⁹ Though Tokayev was installed by Nazarbaev, since becoming President he has sought to establish his own authority at the expense of Nazarbayev's clans, who retained significant institutional power, including control of the intelligence and law enforcement agencies. As a result of the January 2022 events, Tokayev removed Nazarbaev as head of the Security Council and his family from controlling major assets in the country. The head of Kazakhstan's National Security Committee, Karim Massimov, was arrested, charged with high treason, and tried behind closed doors; on April 24 the court sentenced him to 18 years in prison.

However, more than a year later, Tokayev has implemented few of the political reforms he promised at the time of the protests. It is still virtually impossible to register new political parties or for people to elect their own local officials. The March 2023 parliamentary elections were described by interview subjects as neither free nor fair. In

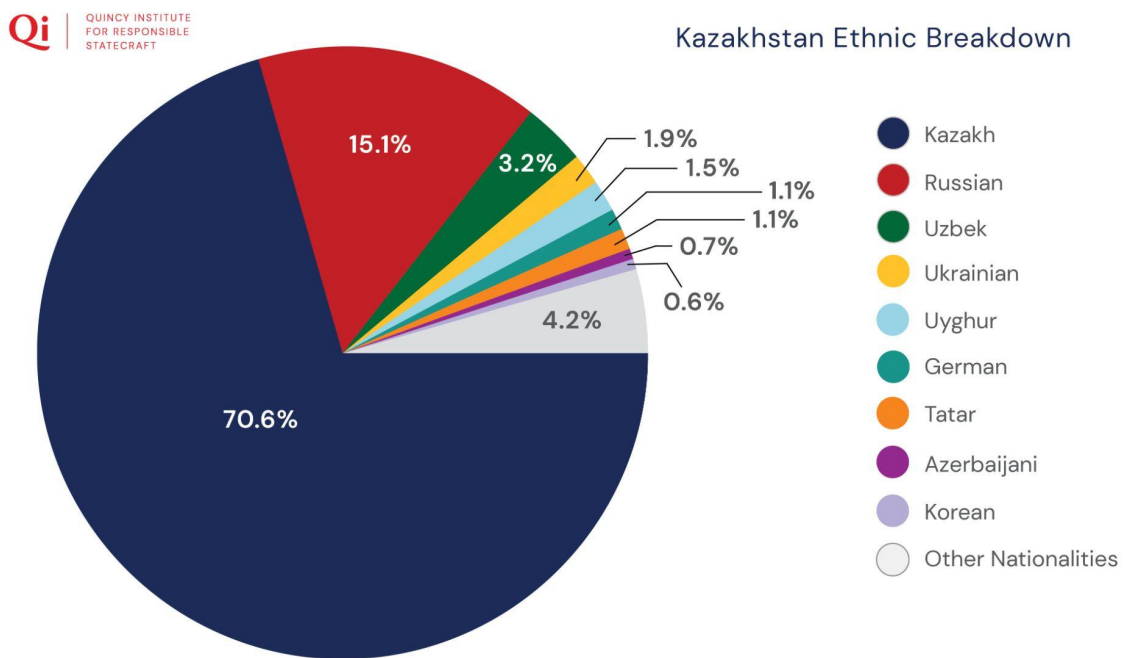
⁸ "Electoral Preferences of People in Kazakhstan," *Demoscope*, March 13, 2023, <https://demos.kz/electoral-preferences-of-people-in-kazakhstan/?lang=en>.

⁹ Mansur Mirolav, "Can centuries-old clan rivalry explain the crisis in Kazakhstan?" *Al Jazeera*, January 11, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/11/a-game-of-thrones-in-kazakhstan-reflects-a-centuries-old-clan-r>.

addition, Kazakh interviewees expressed discontent with the fact that the President doesn't speak Kazakh, or at least makes no effort to speak the language in public.

Kazakhstan has developed its own national identity in the 30 years since the end of the Soviet Union, but its precise character remains unsettled.

Figure 2: Breakdown of Kazakhstan's Ethnic Composition



With time, important demographic changes have taken place. Because of higher Kazakh birthrates, substantial out-migration by ethnic Russians to Russia and ethnic Germans to Germany, and the resettlement of Kazakhs from China, Mongolia, and other Central Asian countries,¹⁰ today Kazakhstan's population is over 70 percent ethnic Kazakh (Figure 2).¹¹ These shifts have had an important effect on the country's sense of national identity. Kazakh nationalists and Kazakh cultural entrepreneurs increasingly

¹⁰ "Major Milestone of Kazakh Independence: Repatriation," *The Astana Times*, October 20, 2021, <https://astanatimes.com/2021/10/major-milestone-of-kazakh-independence-repatriation/>.

¹¹ Zhanna Shayakhmetova, "Kazakhstan Population Reaches 19.17 Million in 2021," *The Astana Times*. December 9, 2021, <https://astanatimes.com/2021/12/kazakhstan-population-reaches-19-17-million-in-2021/>.

advance the concept of a Kazakh nation and encourage the use of the Kazakh language in everyday life.

Kazakh nationalists and Kazakh cultural entrepreneurs increasingly advance the concept of a Kazakh nation and encourage the use of the Kazakh language in everyday life.

Although officially ethnic Russians enjoy equality, in practice, political power has been largely monopolized by Kazakh bureaucratic clans. This is not true in business, however, which is not separated along ethnic lines, but along regional lines depending on where particular resources and industries are located. The majority of oil and gas reserves are located in the ethnic Kazakh regions of Tengiz, Kashagan, and Karachaganak.¹² Most of Kazakhstan's grain is produced in the northern and northeastern regions, with a majority or large minority of ethnic Russians.¹³ In urban centers various ethnicities share work across the service sector, but Russians reportedly possess higher socioeconomic status overall and are paid higher salaries, leaving some Kazakhs feeling disenfranchised.¹⁴

Due to demographic change and Kazakh dominance in political life, the expectation that minority ethnic groups will assimilate rather than cohabit is now increasing. Kazakhstan is likely to become a “Kazakh” nation with a greater role for the Kazakh language. This could potentially create tension with the ethnic Russians, but since their demographic presence continues to shrink on the back of a low birth rate, this may not

¹² “What Are The Biggest Industries In Kazakhstan?” World Atlas, accessed May 10, 2023, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-are-the-biggest-industries-in-kazakhstan.html>.

¹³ “Kazakhstan Country Commercial Guide,” International Trade Administration, accessed May 10, 2023, <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/kazakhstan-agricultural-sector#:~:text=Most%20of%20Kazakhstan's%20grain%20is.reaching%20500%2C000%20hectares%20or%20more.>

¹⁴ Ira N. Gang and Achim Schmillen, “Sometimes, Winners Lose: Economic Disparity and Indigenization in Kazakhstan,” *Journal of Comparative Economics* 45, no. 3 (November 2016), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2502324.

turn into a political problem if “Kazakhization” occurs slowly. However, moves in this direction are already drawing hostile media comments in Russia itself.¹⁵

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There have been important changes in Kazakh official and intellectual attitudes towards the Soviet experience in recent years. Soviet rule is increasingly seen as an expression of Russian colonialism rather than a force for modernization. One critical example is how the infamous famine of the 1930s is perceived. Kazakh ethnic nationalists tend to view the famine the same way that ethnic Ukrainian nationalists view it: as a deliberate attempt at genocide by Stalin, rather than the unintended consequence of forced collectivization for the purpose of rapid industrialization. Scholars of the period continue to debate this question, although there is a general consensus that the famine was primarily man-made.¹⁶

More critical views of the Soviet period tend to come from ethnic Kazakh nationalists and political liberals, who charge Russia with repression of Kazakhs dating back to the territory’s conquest and settlement by the Russian Empire in the 18th and 19th centuries. Some Kazakh nationalists believe that the tragedy of Kazakhstan is the elites’ willingness to prolong the Russian colonial legacy by continuing the dominance of the Russian language and living in the “Russian world.” Nationalist-minded ethnic Kazakhs perceive Russians as conquerors who repressed their language, culture, and religion, and blame Russians for environmental damage caused by nuclear testing in the Semipalatinsk region. Most ethnic Russians, for their part, deny the genocide allegation

¹⁵ Kanat Altynbayev, “Kazakhs Slam Russian Foreign Minister’s Accusations of Xenophobia,” Caravansarai, November 17, 2021, https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2021/11/17/feature-01.

¹⁶ Mark B. Tauger, “Natural Disaster and Human Actions in the Soviet Famine of 1931–1933, The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies, University of Pittsburgh Center for International Studies, January 2001, <https://carlbeckpapers.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/cbp/article/view/89>.

against Soviet authorities and believe they have made a positive contribution to the economy and culture of Kazakhstan.¹⁷

The Kazakh generation that grew up under the Soviet Union, and which (in northern and urban areas) has remained predominantly Russian speaking, tends not to hold the aforementioned negative views of the past or of Russia as a neighbor, and are generally less critical of Russia's war in Ukraine. The term "decolonization" is still quite controversial among local academics and policy circles. While some use it, others argue that under Soviet rule, Kazakhstan was not a Russian colony, and that accusing contemporary Kazakhs of still having a "colonized" mindset is insulting. Some of the academic interviewees argued that people nowadays spend too much time focusing on this "colonial" narrative and don't prioritize what really matters — such as Kazakhstan's economic development.

The government in Kazakhstan remains careful with such narratives to avoid alienating ethnic Russians or inciting an aggressive reaction from the Kremlin. One academic argued that the Baltic states went to the extremes with de-colonization and de-Sovietization and described this as too dangerous to do in Kazakhstan.

The Russian ethnic minority in Kazakhstan primarily resides in northern and northeastern regions including Akmola, North Kazakhstan, East Kazakhstan, Karaganda, Kostanay and Pavlodar. The two presidents of independent Kazakhstan have made it a priority to maintain stable relations with Russia by ensuring the rights and formally equal status of the Russian minority.

Russians and other Slavs have, however, clearly been displaced from all levels of government employment. By the year 2000, only 8 percent of government employees were Russian.¹⁸ Russians have also started to feel that they have been sidelined to

¹⁷ Nargis Kassenova, "Why Kazakhstan Will Not Be Returning to Russia's Fold," Harvard University Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, January 13, 2022, <https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/why-kazakhstan-will-not-be-returning-russias-fold>.

¹⁸ "Minority Rights: Cultural Diversity and Development in Central Asia," United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, October 2004, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/544918?ln=ar>.

provide space for repatriated Kazakhs from China and Mongolia, who receive cash subsidies from the government.¹⁹

Historically, separatist sentiment has been related to economic grievances more than ethnic considerations. Protests have also occurred over the renaming of streets from Soviet to Kazakh names. But no important social mobilization has been recorded. These debates are more visible on social media than anywhere else.

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According to interview subjects, ethnic Russians perceive themselves and their communities to be well integrated into society. However, some Kazakhs paint a different picture. Kazakh nationalists and liberals perceive the ethnic Russians as unintegrated, refusing to learn the local language and remaining enclosed in the Russian media space. Ethnic Russians are reportedly employed largely in their own family businesses. They were characterized as having an “imperial” mentality by some interviewees who are equally worried Kazakhstan will be next in what they describe as Russia’s imperial quest to restore Soviet borders.

These fears have been exacerbated by the Kremlin’s decision to sign a new decree on the “Concept of Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation Abroad” in September 2022,²⁰ providing them with a newly codified justification to intervene in the domestic affairs of other states of the former Soviet Union should they decide that the rights of local Russian–speaking groups are violated in any significant way. However, in a

¹⁹ “World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Kazakhstan: Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians,” *Refworld*, 2008, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/49749cfa2d.html>.

²⁰ “Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 611 ‘On Approval of the Concept of Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation Abroad,’” Official Internet Portal of Legal Information, May 9, 2022, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202209050019?index=0&rangeSize=1>.

nationwide opinion poll in Kazakhstan, 73 percent of respondents still believe it is impossible that Russia will attack their country next.²¹

Other ethnic minorities, such as the Chinese Muslim minority called the Dungans, have experienced tensions with other locals, as demonstrated by deadly ethnic clashes in February 2020, which left 11 people dead and dozens injured.²² However, clashes such as these are usually caused by economic or land issues, which then take on a secondary ethnic dimension. After clashes between Dungans and local police, thousands of Dungans fled across the border to Kyrgyzstan.²³

Ethnic Uyghurs are reportedly very well integrated. Kazakh–Uyghur tensions are unheard of. However, Uyghur communities strongly oppose Chinese repression of the Uyghur population in neighboring Xinjiang. There are frequent protests outside the Chinese consulate in Almaty by Kazakhs and Uygurs. Nevertheless, in terms of cultural expression, the government in Kazakhstan is open to allowing the Uyghur community the freedom to express their culture through theater, language, art shows, and musical performances. As long as these specific events do not turn political, they can be held in abundance.

The government of Kazakhstan has, however, taken care to restrict access to information concerning the atrocities in Xinjiang in order to avoid angering Beijing. Once such move was the decision to close down Uyghur activist organizations like Atajurt Eriktileri, and to jail its founder.²⁴

All interviewees commented on existing “sinophobia” in Kazakhi society, describing anti–Chinese sentiment, lack of trust towards China, lack of understanding towards

²¹ “The Attitude of Kazakhstanis to the War in Ukraine,” *Demoscope*, November 30, 2022, <https://demos.kz/otnoshenie-kazahstancsev-k-vojne-v-ukraine-2/>.

²² “Dozens Jailed Over Deadly 2020 Ethnic Clashes in Kazakhstan,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFERL)*, April 27, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-dozens-jailed-2020-ethnic-violence-dungans/31225137.html>.

²³ Tamila Varshalomidze, “Ethnic Violence Blows Hole in Kazakhstan’s Narrative of Tolerance,” *Al Jazeera*, February 10, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/10/ethnic-violence-blows-hole-in-kazakhstans-narrative-of-tolerance>.

²⁴ Reid Standish, “Our Government Doesn’t Want to Spoil Relations with China,” *The Atlantic*, September 3, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/09/china-xinjiang-uyghur-kazakhstan/597106/>.

Chinese culture and even a lack of awareness among the public of increased Chinese business and economic influence in the country. Since China is a growing power, it is feared more than Russia, a declining power that shares far more cultural similarities with Kazakhstan. Anti-Chinese protests in the country have grown, particularly after an incident in 2021 involving the sale of land to China. Though most interviewees also described people's attitudes towards the repression in Xinjiang as not being a major political issue (despite the presence of a 1.5 million-strong Kazakh minority in Xinjiang), ethnic Uyghurs expressed great hostility to Beijing.

Drivers of potential tension

The war in Ukraine has exacerbated political tensions in Kazakhstan. Some rhetoric from Russia has made Kazakh officials nervous. Russia's President Vladimir Putin's correct but tactless 2014 comment that "the Kazakhs never had any statehood [prior to Soviet rule]," led to a swift backlash from ordinary Kazakhs and some government officials. More recently, in late April 2023, Russian television talk show host Tigran Keosayan criticized Kazakh authorities for canceling the annual World War II victory commemoration events and warned that Kazakhstan could meet the same fate as Ukraine. Some Russian leaders, including Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, have alleged that the United States is interested in developing biological weapons in former Soviet republics, including Kazakhstan, which could serve as a pretext for intervention.²⁵

The war in Ukraine has ignited worry among some members of the Kazakh elite that Kazakhstan could be next in the Kremlin's expansionist agenda, but according to opinion polls the majority of the population does not see a Russian invasion as a likely scenario. This could change if Kazakhstan were to increase ethnic nationalist policies or fail to address economic grievances, triggering protests that could turn into ethnic conflict, which might encourage Kremlin intervention.

²⁵ Saif Islam, "Between the West and Russia: The Ukraine War and Kazakhstan's Tough Balancing Act," S-RM, May 10, 2022, <https://insights.s-rminform.com/between-the-west-and-russia>.

Nonetheless, according to opinion polls, almost 60 percent of respondents declare themselves to be neutral when it comes to taking sides in the Russia–Ukraine war and 53 percent think it should end in a compromise. Kazakhstan has thus far either abstained or voted with Russia when it comes to U.N. resolutions. Kazakhstan voted against the December 2022 resolution demanding Russia stop military aggression and withdraw all its military forces from the territory of Ukraine and more recently abstained from the one–year anniversary resolution calling for a comprehensive, just, and lasting peace in Ukraine and the complete withdrawal of Russian troops from the country. Kazakhstan wishes to remain neutral to preserve its stability given its geographical proximity and level of dependence on Russia. Any attempt to sway Kazakhstan to join the Western camp would cause significant tension with Russia and risk destabilizing Kazakhstan, with spillover effects in much of Central Asia.

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Russians evading the draft have fled to Kazakhstan in large numbers. Around 70,000 of them have received Kazakh ID numbers and may wish to stay long term. This has upset the balance of jobs and apartment prices in the regions where they have settled, and risks creating ethnic tensions. About 38 percent of respondents to a national opinion poll expressed unhappiness with their arrival. While apartment prices and jobs were of primary concern, of those that oppose the Russian influx, 30 percent also said that they feared these new arrivals could contaminate society with ideas of the “Russian world.”²⁶

Precipitated by increasing tensions from the war and new Russians settling in Kazakhstan, on November 8, 2022, the government put forward legislation to require a

²⁶ “The Attitude of Kazakhstanis to the War in Ukraine,” *Demoscope*, November 30, 2022, <https://demos.kz/otnoshenie-kazahstancsev-k-vojne-v-ukraine-2/>.

solid foundation in the Kazakh language and the country's history and legislation as a requirement for obtaining Kazakh citizenship. These issues could potentially exacerbate anti-Russian sentiment in Kazakhstan and fuel ethnic tension.

Other drivers of conflict include demographic and social changes. In major cities in Kazakhstan, Russian is still the lingua franca. In the regions, Kazakh is more widely used even though most still speak and understand Russian. Overall, only about two-thirds of the population are believed to speak fluent Kazakh. In October 2006, Nazarbaev announced the government's eventual plan to move from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet, on the model of Turkey under Ataturk; this was officially implemented in 2017.

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While Kazakhization efforts are expected and rather normal, undergoing these processes too rapidly may cause political and ethnic tension vis-a-vis the still important Russian minority.

During Soviet times, only 1 percent of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan spoke fluent Kazakh, whereas this figure now stands at 6 percent.²⁸ This is due to Kazakhization efforts such as increasing the number of schools in the Kazakh language. Most Kazakhs are bilingual.²⁹ This indicates that the state program of expanding the functionality of Kazakh in all spheres of life has led to an upward trend in the use of Kazakh without necessarily diminishing the use of Russian. While Kazakhization efforts are expected and rather normal, undergoing these processes too rapidly may cause political and ethnic tension vis-a-vis the still important Russian minority.

²⁷ Nargis Kassenova, "Why Kazakhstan Will Not Be Returning to Russia's Fold," Harvard University Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, January 13, 2022.,

<https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/why-kazakhstan-will-not-be-returning-russias-fold>.

²⁸ Juldyz Smagulova, "Language Policies of Kazakhization and Their Influence on Language Attitudes and Use," *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 11, no. 3-4 (December 19, 2008), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13670050802148798>.

²⁹ Smagulova, "Language Policies of Kazakhization."

The state program of expanding the functionality of Kazakh in all spheres of life has led to an upward trend in the use of Kazakh without necessarily diminishing the use of Russian.

According to interviewees at Medianet, a prominent social media organization in Almaty, social media disputes on the issue of language are becoming more frequent. For example, if a menu is not available in the Kazakh language, social media rows over “canceling” that restaurant occur between ethnic Kazakhs and Russians. At present, these issues are not discussed openly in parliament or political institutions, but one of the risks of having a more open political system, should it emerge in the future, is that these tensions might enter into politics.

The stronger the Kazakh ethno–national movement becomes, the more ethnic Russians will feel endangered, leading to ethnic tension and the risk of Kremlin intervention, especially if the pace of Kazakhization is too rapid. In addition, should elites descended from the local leadership of the Soviet Communist Party be replaced by more ethno–nationalist leaders, the idea of a “Kazakh” nation will dominate any other identity configurations. If this occurs too quickly, instability may ensue.

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If Kazakhization efforts are implemented incrementally, the response from the Russian ethnic minority will be less vociferous because they are a shrinking demographic that will not constitute an important percentage of the population in 50 years. It thus remains in the interest of Kazakhstan to maintain its current policies for the foreseeable future.

Other potential sources of instability

Aside from tension between rising Kazakh nationalism and the Russian minority in Kazakhstan, other potential areas of instability could arise in the Uyghur community if the government lifts its controls on the free flow of information on Chinese repression in Xinjiang and lifts limits on political protests. Any change in this policy could radically worsen relations with China.

Should an ethno-nationalist leader become the next leader of Kazakhstan, placing more importance on the repression of Uyghurs and Kazakhs of Xinjiang could become more expedient than it is to the current Soviet-era legacy leadership. This could undermine Kazakhstan's internal stability and balancing act with China and Russia.

Another potential source of de-stabilization is the rise of Islamic extremism. The ethno-nationalist movement includes a strong Islamist component. In Kazakhstan almost all ethnic Kazakhs identify as Muslim and, while many are non-practicing, there is a clear trend towards re-discovering their Muslim roots. More and more people are fasting during Ramadan, the use of the hijab has increased, and an increasing number of people pray in mosques. This has gone hand-in-hand with the re-discovery of Kazakh ethnic identity after the fall of the Soviet Union.

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The role of Islamic radicalism remains limited and is strongly discouraged by the Kazakh state. However, according to local experts, extremism is growing in the country and is manifesting internally across ethnic and religious lines. According to the U.S. Department of State, there has been an increase in extremism and terrorism-related prosecutions in the country. In 2021 there was about a 20 percent increase in registered criminal cases related to terrorism from the previous year. However, local researchers

estimate that up to 90 percent of charges filed as instances of terrorism do not involve real or planned violent acts. In addition, some of these cases appear to be cases related to political opposition activity.³⁰

Along with the security threats that terrorism poses, any potential rise in Islamist terrorism would also incite increased Russian and Chinese involvement, since they are particularly concerned with combating extremism in the region, and this could in turn worsen internal tensions.

U.S. policy and relations with Kazakhstan

The United States has so far kept its distance from Kazakhstan, focusing on the development of economic ties, particularly in its oil sector. The United States does not appear to have political or military ambitions in Kazakhstan, applying the much-needed caution that is advisable in its approach to Central Asia as a whole. Kazakhstan's main goals in relations with the United States are to attract investment and balance against over-dependence on Russia and China.³¹ Trade between the United States and Kazakhstan has grown, but still pales in comparison to that with Russia or China. The United States does, however, have significant investments in Kazakhstan's oil fields.³² Chevron and other U.S. companies account for 30 percent of total oil extracted in 2019. This compares with 17 percent pumped by China's CNPC, Sinopec, and CITIC, and 3 percent for Russia's Lukoil.³³

³⁰ "Country Reports on Terrorism 2021: Kazakhstan," U.S. State Department, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2021/kazakhstan/#:~:text=There%20appeared%20to%20be%20an,19.8%20percent%20increase%20from%202020.>

³¹ Assel Satubaldina, "American Companies Invest Nearly \$54 Billion in Kazakhstan Over 30 Years," *The Astana Times*, June 16, 2021, <https://astanatimes.com/2021/06/american-companies-invest-nearly-54-billion-in-kazakhstan-over-30-years/>; Gennady Rudkevich, "Central Asia at the Mercy of Russia and China," *East Asia Forum*, October 26, 2018, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/10/26/central-asia-at-the-mercy-of-russia-and-china/>.

³² "Kazakhstan: Highlights of Operations," Chevron, <https://www.chevron.com/worldwide/kazakhstan>.

³³ Temur Umarov, "Can Russia and China Edge the United States Out of Kazakhstan?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 8, 2021, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/85078>.

Kazakhstan's main goals in relations with the United States are to attract investment and balance against over-dependence on Russia and China.

The United States is concerned about China's growing role in the region and has particularly kept an eye on economic and energy cooperation between Kazakhstan and China.³⁴ The U.S. is also concerned with China's treatment of Uyghur Muslims in neighboring Xinjiang. In 2020, then-U.S. secretary of State Mike Pompeo urged Kazakhstan to join the United States in pressing China to end its repressive tactics in the region, but Kazakhstan refused to take a harder line.³⁵ In terms of military cooperation with the United States, Kazakhstan has hosted the small annual "Steppe Eagle" military exercise with NATO since 2006.³⁶ From 1991--2020, the United States supplied a minor share of Kazakhstan's total arms imports, totalling 1.3 percent.³⁷

Following 9/11 and the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan, for many years a principal U.S. interest in Central Asia was countering Islamist extremism. Kazakhstan has helped by accepting U.S. extremist rehabilitation programs.³⁸ But since the United States pulled out of Afghanistan, its interest in Central Asia has diminished.³⁹

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, interviewees in Kazakhstan have indicated that the United States is showing renewed interest in the country as part of its wider strategy against Russia, reflected in Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's trip to the region in 2022.

³⁴ Niva Yau, "Tracing the Chinese Footprints in Kazakhstan's Oil and Gas Industry," *The Diplomat*. December 12, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/tracing-the-chinese-footprints-in-kazakhstans-oil-and-gas-industry/>.

³⁵ "Pompeo Urges Kazakhstan to Press China Over Xinjiang Crackdown," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFERL)*, February 2, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/pompeo-kazakhstan-nazarbaev-uzbekistan-central-asia/30412354.html>.

³⁶ Catherine Putz, "Russian Ambassador to Kazakhstan Says US-NATO Steppe Eagle Exercise Will 'No Longer Fly,'" *The Diplomat*, February 11, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/russian-ambassador-to-kazakhstan-says-us-nato-steppe-eagle-exercise-will-no-longer-fly/>.

³⁷ Aygerim Zholdas, "Import of Arms in Central Asia: trends and directions for diversification," Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, October 1, 2021, <https://cabar.asia/en/import-of-arms-in-central-asia-trends-and-directions-for-diversification>.

³⁸ Bruce Pannier and Muhammad Tahir, "Majlis Podcast: Mixed Results for Women Jihadists Brought Back to Kazakhstan," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFERL)*, July 4, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/mailis-women-extremists-kazakhstan/31340279.html>.

³⁹ Murat Sofuoglu, "How the Afghanistan Withdrawal will Affect US Policy in Central Asia," *TRT World*, 2021, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/how-the-afghanistan-withdrawal-will-affect-us-policy-in-central-asia-49438>.

However, the majority of interview subjects also believed that real U.S. commitment remains very limited. The Biden administration’s plan to bolster engagement with a \$50 million investment in Central Asia was extremely low and well below what locals expected.⁴⁰

Policy recommendations for the United States

This analysis has highlighted that, although the internal situation in Kazakhstan is currently reasonably stable, several trends could increase instability and even trigger violence within the country in the future. The United States’ current policy is balanced and focuses primarily on economic ties. However, in the event of an increased level of ethnic tension in Kazakhstan, U.S. interests would be best served by refraining from getting involved – as it did in January 2022. U.S. interference would only place Kazakhstan in a vulnerable position vis-a-vis its neighboring countries as it would incite security tensions with Russia and China. This would ultimately involve the United States in an unnecessary security crisis in a location where it does not possess major strategic interests.

In the current state of affairs, the United States should augment its economic investment, trade, and diplomatic ties with Kazakhstan to help the country develop; this could also help reduce the threat of political and religious radicalization. However, while American businesses should be encouraged to compete in the country on a commercial basis, the United States government should avoid using them as a proxy for zero-sum geopolitical competition with China and Russia.

While civil society activists and liberal minded city dwellers expressed a clear desire to have more American involvement in Kazakhstan in order to help the country develop into a democracy, most people are rather apolitical, don’t have any particular affinity for

⁴⁰ “US Makes Play for Influence in Central Asia,” *Market News*, February 28, 2023, <https://marketnews.com/us-makes-play-for-influence-in-central-asia>.

the United States, and are even quite skeptical of liberal values.⁴¹ In light of this reality, the promotion of liberal democracy inside the country is unlikely to be fruitful. Political reforms in Kazakhstan will take place slowly due to the country's history and institutional legacy. It is important to note that though the power structures have remained undemocratic, they have managed to keep the country stable.

While American businesses should be encouraged to compete in the country on a commercial basis, the United States government should avoid using them as a proxy for zero-sum geopolitical competition with China and Russia.

Instead, the United States should attempt to aid Kazakhstan through mechanisms like USAID or similar development-oriented organizations. Areas where Kazakhstan needs support due to demographic changes include housing, education, healthcare, and transport as the country will face increasing pressures from urbanization and population growth. The United States could provide advice and assistance on these issues to help Kazakhstan create an effective strategy to deal with these challenges. These measures will boost America's soft power and goodwill among the Kazakh population.

Diplomatically, the United States is involved in Central Asia through the C5+1 network. This is a diplomatic platform between the United States and the Central Asian countries to discuss matters of mutual interest. While interviewees criticized C5+1 for being an actionless diplomatic club, it is still important for the United States to maintain this platform and even strengthen it by meeting more frequently and implementing concrete joint economic projects for the region. Central Asian countries need to be reassured that

⁴¹ "What People in Kazakhstan Think of the January Events," *Demoscope*, February 7, 2023, <https://demos.kz/what-people-in-kazakhstan-think-of-the-january-events/?lang=en>.

the United States is an important partner and will increase its investment for the region's economic and social development.

Based on Kazakhstan's particularities and regional relationships, it is understandable that it will mostly refrain from voting with the United States at the United Nations against Russia or China. Voting against these nations would undermine Kazakhstan's security, which for obvious geographic reasons the United States is in no position to help. Therefore, United States efforts to push Kazakhstan to denounce Chinese human rights abuses in Xinjiang or to sway Kazakhstan into joining the West against Russia's invasion of Ukraine are unlikely to succeed and may backfire.

Conclusion

Rising ethnic nationalism in Kazakhstan presents a challenge within Kazakhstan and for Kazakh–Russian relations. However, Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy and nation–building policies have kept the country stable and have allowed it to maintain pragmatic relations with its neighbors for now. It would be in the interest of Kazakhstan to continue applying such policies to maintain both internal and external stability. Ensuring the rights of the Russian minority in Kazakhstan will prevent Russia from using their grievances as a pretext for intervention there – something which it has not yet shown any desire to do.

Moreover, Kazakhstan can afford to move slowly and cautiously towards identity–related reforms, because natural demographic trends are strengthening Kazakh political and cultural dominance. Ethnic and religious groups should be balanced against traditional Soviet era power structures to maintain internal stability, as the government is already doing.

Washington is in no position to remove Kazakhstan from Moscow and Beijing's influence and should therefore keep a prudent and constructive distance from these matters.

The United States is currently pursuing a balanced approach toward Kazakhstan. While the United States needs to make sure it does not inadvertently disturb Kazakhstan's delicate balance, it should use its soft power tools to aid in Kazakhstan's economic and social development. But in terms of military or political issues, Washington is in no position to remove Kazakhstan from Moscow and Beijing's influence and should therefore keep a prudent and constructive distance from these matters. For Kazakhs, Russia and China are all too close while the United States is far away; and no U.S. strategy can change that reality.

About the Author

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