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Kazakhstan - a geo-strategic player in Central Asia

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General overview

Kazakhstan, officially the Republic of Kazakhstan, is the world's largest landlocked country, and the ninth largest in the world, with an area of 2.171.300 sq km, bigger than the Western Europe territory. The contiguous transcontinental country in Central Asia is bordering China, Kyrgyzstan, Russian Federation, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. With a total of 12.185 km of boundaries, Kazakhstan has the longest common border with Russia - 6,846 km; 2,203 km with Uzbekistan; 1,530 km of common border with China, 1,224 km with Kyrgyzstan, and the shortest - 379 km, with Turkmenistan.

Being a country stretched over a vast area in the northern and central Eurasia, Kazakhstan dominates the Central Asia region and the trade routes between east and west. Also, it is connected with the European continent through its small portion of the territory on the west bank of the Ural River, located in the eastern edge of Europe. This important feature - stretching on both sides of the river, makes it one of the only two landlocked countries in the world lying on two continents. The transcontinental provinces are Atyrau Province and West Kazakhstan Province, the capital of the former, Atyrau, being split by the Urals in two parts, making it a transcontinental city. Two of Atyrau Provinces are entirely in Europe, other three are entirely in Asia, while Inderskiy and Makhambetskiy are transcontinental districts. The West Kazakhstan Province has 12 districts: 5 of them and the province's capital city of Oral are entirely in Europe, other 5 are in Asia, and one, Akzhaikskiy district is transcontinental.

The Republic of Kazakhstan has a vast territory but much of the country is semi-desert and one-third of it is occupied by the Kazakh Steppe, the world's biggest dry steppe region, characterized by large areas of grasslands and sandy region. But Kazakhstan also has a few important rivers and lakes like: Ural River, Ili River, Istys River, Syr Darya, Aral Sea, Lake Balkhash and Lake Zaysan.

Even if Kazakhstan is the biggest landlocked country in the world, and the 9th largest country by size of its territory, due to its geography is one of the most sparsely populated countries with less than 6 people/km². In July 2013, the population was estimated to 17,736,896 millions of persons, so the Republic of Kazakhstan was ranked 61 in the states hierarchy by population size¹, with about 96% of it living in the Asian part of the country.

Political overview

Kazakhstan was the last of the soviet republics to declare independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, as a result of the end of the Cold War. It became independent on December 16, 1991, when its communist-era leader, Nursultan Nazarbayev, became the country's first President. Before this, he was a prominent figure in the soviet republic: in 1984 Nazarbayev became the chairman of the Council of Ministers and was the First Secretary of the Kazakh Communist Party, from 1989 to 1991. In other words, even if he is the President of the state since 1991, he came to power three years earlier, in 1989, as the head of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan. Serving before the declaration of independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, he became the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the same year, and was reelected in 2005 by an overwhelming majority of 91.15%, then gained another five-year term in 2011. In 2005, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and other election watchdog organizations criticized the results of the elections reported by the Central Electoral Commission of Kazakhstan.

Since December 16, 1991, Kazakhstan is a unitary republic (governed as one single unit, by a supreme central government), with Nursultan Nazarbayev, as the first and

¹ *The World Factbook*, Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2119rank.html?countryname=Kazakhstan&countrycode=kz®ionCode=cas&rank=61#kz>.

only President. As can be guess, the politics of Kazakhstan is dominated by the President - the head of state and the commander in chief of the Army. With many prerogatives, Nursultan Nazarbayev is the one who represents Kazakhstan at the most important events like conferences and forums of the world (meetings at UN, Nuclear Security Summits, World Economic Forum in Davos etc.).

Known as a republic with an authoritarian president rule, with little power outside the executive branch, the human rights issue seems to be a reason of concern for the international community especially for the non-governmental observers. Freedom House, a notorious human rights organization, ranked Republic of Kazakhstan with a 6 in Political Rights and a 5 in Civil Liberties, classifying it as "Not Free".²

Also, in 2005, a tense year for Kazakhstan due its presidential elections, a U.S. Department of State report issued on February 28, mentions that "the Government's human rights record remained poor, and it continued to commit numerous abuses. The Government severely limited citizens' right to change their government and democratic institutions remained weak". The same document assets that "the Government continued to restrict freedom of the press. There were instances of Government harassment of independent media. As a consequence, some media outlets closed or remained closed, and many journalists practiced self censorship".³

Also, according to Human Rights Watch, Kazakhstan's human rights record has seriously deteriorated following violent clashes in December 2011 between police and demonstrators, Freedom of assembly is strictly controlled and a restrictive law on religious freedoms remains in

force. There were attacks on independent journalists, and authorities shut down key independent media outlets. Legislation regulating workers' rights is vague and burdensome, and a ban on strikes in certain sectors of the economy restricts workers' rights.⁴

Kazakhstan - a geo-strategic player in Central Asia

For Central Asia and the regions that are linked with it, Kazakhstan represents an important point on the map and this because it occupies a pivotal space in the area. It is one of the fifteen new states to emerge from Soviet Union in 1991, becoming, step by step, a regional leader in Central Asia but also an influential player in global geopolitics, a role that expended continuous since the dissolution of Soviet empire.

The implosion of the Soviet Union left behind not one but four nuclear countries, a real concern for the international community responsible with the regional and international security. In 1991, Kazakhstan had the world's fourth largest nuclear arsenal, but surprisingly, decided to cooperate with the USA instead of the new born Russian Federation in nuclear disarmament. In 1991 Kazakhstan closed its nuclear test site and by 1996, it removed all its nuclear warheads, becoming the first state in history to complete voluntary nuclear disarmament. At that moment, Kazakhstan decision to cooperate with Washington and not with Moscow represented one of the key factors in paving the way to acquire an important strategic role in Central Asia, but also a proof of a multi-vector policy.

Today, Kazakhstan is an important country both regional and global because of its:

➤ **position:** Kazakhstan shares borders with two of the most important countries in this part of the globe: Russian

² *Kazakhstan. Freedom in the world 2013*, Freedom House, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2013/kazakhstan>.

³ *Kazakhstan*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, February 28, 2005, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2004/41689.htm>.

⁴ *Human Rights in Kazakhstan*, Human Rights Watch, <http://www.hrw.org/europecentral-asia/kazakhstan>.

occasional papers.....

Federation and China, while is one of the countries included on the New Silk Road map. Also, being in the proximity with China, Russia, Iran and the South Asian sub-continent, the security and stability of Kazakhstan is an increasingly vital interest in region and to all major powers, including the USA.⁵ Kazakhstan position became very important for the West as a result of the war in Afghanistan and the need to identify alternative routes for transportation of military material and weapons;

➤ **energy resources:** Central Asia is to become a crucial energy supplier for Europe. With an estimated oil reserves of 100 billion barrels on a par with Kuwait, Kazakhstan is one of the central-Asian county that owns large reserve of energy resources, but has not describes itself as an energy superpower. Instead, president Nursulant Nazarbayev has claimed that his country will become a factor of energy security in Asia and Europe, one of the pillars of energy security in this regions.⁶

➤ **transportation routs:** with a vast territory, the dispersion of natural resources and centers of economic activity and the remoteness from world markets, an advanced transportation system is vital for Kazakhstan. Today, Kazakhstan has a total road network of 93,612 km meaning: 85,100 km of paved roads and 9,512 km of unpaved roads,⁷ with 5 international highways passes from Kazakhstan: M-36 (Almaty-Astana-Kostanay, continues to Chelyabinsk); Almaty-Petropavl; M-38 (Almaty-Shymkent, continues to Tashkent); M-32 (Shymkent-Aktobe-Oral, continues to Samara).

⁵ *Kazakhstan's strategic significance*, <http://www.eurodialogue.org/Kazakhstan-Strategic-Significance>.

⁶ *Kazakhstan becoming a pillar of energy security in Asia and Europe*, Sep 13, 2006, http://www.gasandoil.com/news/central_asia/36a413189808e7172c9923a0568e9c01.

⁷ *Kazakhstan*, The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kz.html>.

In 2009, Kazakhstan started the construction of an important road route - "Western Europe-Western China" highway, scheduled to be completed in 2013. Another important project is the construction of a new highway connecting Almaty city with Khorgos, a town in China situated close to the Kazakhstan - China border. Named "Development of East-West Roadways (Almaty to Khorgos section): Western Europe (WE)-Western China (WC) International Transit Corridor" the project is estimated to be completed in 2015 and to cost \$1.25bn of which the \$188.5m will be financed by the Kazakh government.⁸

Kazakhstan - part of the New Silk Road

The initiative of a "New Silk Road" belongs to the US and is a part of a strategy for Afghanistan's economic development, a strategy that aims to make the Afghan country, strongly affected by war, a hub for commerce. The project was announced by US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, in October 2011 and cannot be achieved without the involvement of neighboring countries of Afghanistan, including Kazakhstan, and this because the "New Silk Road" vision recognizes that a secure, stable, and increasingly prosperous Afghanistan can only exist in the context of a secure, stable, and increasingly prosperous region.⁹

But the New Silk Road project is more than an initiative to help Afghanistan, a part of the program countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) facilitating trade between East Asia and Western Europe. These four countries are assuming a significant and new role in international relations, and this because they become very important in trans-continental trade. From all this four countries, Kazakhstan remarks itself as the most active

⁸ *World Bank funds major highway project in Kazakhstan*, Oct 16, 2012, <http://www.roadtraffic-technology.com/news/newsworld-bank-funds-major-highway-project-kazakhstan>.

⁹ *U.S. Support for the New Silk Road*, U.S. Department of State, Diplomacy in Action, <http://www.state.gov/p/sca/ci/af/newsilkroad/>.

actor: recently it held the chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, has a seat in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, is member in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and has a partnership plan with NATO.

Since it became independent, Kazakhstan understood that it can be an important spot on the regional but also global map, so it started to behave like one: Astana wanted the country to become one of the world's top producers of oil and to ensure that Kazakhstan can sit among the most 50 competitive economies. But the large central-Asian country realized that becoming a dominant player in the region due its rich oil and gas reserves is not enough while its strategic position as a key land bridge between Asia and the European continent can be a valuable element, so Kazakhstan gave special attention to its infrastructure, particularly its roads.

For Kazakhstan, being a part of the New Silk Road Initiative represents an important step in its development, because for an advanced economic and political independence it must develop its internal and external transport corridors. Therefore, the ambitious initiative of the New Silk Road, a \$7 billion project to connect China with Western Europe, is seen as an incentive of its growing economy.

Kazakhstan - on the way back home from Afghanistan

If during the war, NATO had to deliver fuel, food, military equipment and other logistic supplies for its soldiers, today the Alliance needs to bring a big part of them back home. Since Afghanistan is a landlocked country, supplies must pass through other countries territory (by air routes or roads). Because air shipping is not quite cheap, being an expensive way to transport the non-lethal equipment on the way to Afghanistan, NATO preferred to use the ground routes through Pakistan (shipping goods by sea to the port of Karachi), through Russia or the Central Asian states.

The planned ISAF troop withdrawal in 2014 raises the same problem for NATO - the transportation of the non-lethal equipment from Afghanistan. Even if Pakistan remains one of the most advantageous route, incidents like those repeated on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border can cause interruptions. For example, due the 2011 NATO attack (Salala attack), Islamabad blocked the routes used by the Alliance until 2012, so NATO had to shift its focus to the Northern Distribution Network, 85% of fuel supplies for the war effort in Afghanistan were being shipped through the northern supply routes that connect Baltic and Caspian Sea ports with Afghanistan through Russia and Central Asia and the Caucasus.

The Northern Distribution Network is also an alternative route for the withdrawal of non-lethal equipment from Afghanistan, country that borders Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, even if it is a longer and costlier route than the routes through Pakistan.

The Northern Distribution Network, established in 2009 due to the increased risk of using Pakistan as a transit country, includes several routes:

- a "southern route" transits the Caucasus completely bypassing Russia, from Georgia. Starting from the Black Sea port Ponti, it travels north to Azerbaijan and its port Baku, where goods are loaded onto ferries to cross the Caspian Sea. Landfall is Kazakhstan, where the goods are carried by truck to Uzbekistan and finally Afghanistan;
- another route which is actually a spur of the northern route, bypasses Uzbekistan and proceeds from Kazakhstan via Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which has a northeast border with Afghanistan. This route is hampered by bad roads in Tajikistan.¹⁰

¹⁰ Bill Mormon, *New Supply "Front" for Afghan War Runs Across Russia, Georgia and the 'Stans*, February – March 2012, The European Institute, <http://www.europeaninstitute.org/February->

occasional papers.....

Preparing the ISAF withdrawal, NATO has signed deals with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to use their territory for evacuating vehicles and military equipment from Afghanistan. "The deals with the Central Asian countries will ensure for NATO a range of new options and the robust and flexible transport network we need"¹¹, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen announced at that time.

Even if Kazakhstan does not directly borders Afghanistan, Astana is ready to play "the most active role" in supporting reverse transit of the U.S. and NATO troops and equipments from Afghanistan: "this is an incredibly complex task" said President Nazarbayev's advisor for Political Affairs, Ermukhamet Ertysbayev, in an interview in Washington, June 2012, reported Silk Road Newline. Speaking about the problems regarding the southern routes through Pakistan, he mentioned that „the route that's open would be the northern route, which would go through Kazakhstan, and we would take the most active role in supporting the U.S. in this endeavor and we are the ally of the United States".¹²

On May 11, 2013, in the presence of Kazakh and Turkmen presidents was opened the first direct railway connection in history between Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Part of the North-South project which links Central Asia (and China and Russia) with the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, the inaugurated railway line may become an integral part of the Northern Distribution Network system, as the Turkmen railway network extends to the border with Afghanistan.

A new railway route to/from Afghanistan, the one between Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan may be an important competitor to another country of the region - Uzbekistan, the only country through which the railway transport to and from Afghanistan is ensured.¹³

There is no doubt that such initiatives require major efforts for Kazakhstan, but Astana seems ready to assume all it takes to become a regional leader and a reliable partner for its allies. For this, the Kazakh state will use all types of trumps it can capitalize in his advantage: political, geopolitical, economic and strategic ones.

%E2%80%93March-2010/new-supply-front-for-afghan-war-runs-across-russia-georgia-and-the-stans.html.

¹¹ *NATO signs deal to move Afghan equipment via Central Asia*, BBC News, June 4, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-18326970>.

¹² *Kazakhstan to play most active role in supporting reverse transit of ISAF from Afghanistan*, Europe Dialogue, <http://www.eurodialogue.org/Kazakhstan%20to%20play%20most%20active%20role%20in%20supporting%20reverse%20transit%20of%20ISAF%20forces%20from%20Afghanistan>.

¹³ Aleksandra Jarosiewicz, *The new iron Silk Route*, Center for Eastern Studies, May 15, 2013, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/eastweek/2013-05-15/new-iron-silk-route>.

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