

Foreign Policy Challenges for a Post-Nazarbayev Kazakhstan

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Abstract After almost 30 years of rule by Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan is going through a sensitive phase of power transition. Since the "multi-vector" diplomacy of these years represents one of the best legacies of the first President, policy-makers would leave as untouched as possible the sphere of foreign policy. At the same time, a crisis of legitimacy following the Presidential elections together with a number of trends which are changing the social and ethno-demographic structure of the population will also put into question some traditional lines of the country's diplomacy. This will add to the challenges to which the political class will have to provide innovative responses in order to preserve the stability of the country.

Keywords Kazakhstan. Power transition. Nationalism. International relations. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). U.S. Policies in Central Asia.

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1 Introduction: Overall Factors to influence Tokayev's Decision Making

The situation in the country has changed, as it has the situation around the world. We have become the object of influence of international turbulent processes. Kazakhstan, being a part of the world community, feels on itself what is happening outside its borders. We must be together to work for the future of Kazakhstan.

Message released by Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev after his election to the Presidency.¹

In his much anticipated but still surprising decision to start the process of power transition from his thirty-years rule, Nursultan Nazarbayev made the choice of his successor with an eye on the implications for Kazakhstan's foreign policy. Apart from a loyal member of the establishment, Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev is known to be the best national diplomat. He knows from inside the principal international institutions and mechanisms and has been together with Nazarbayev the craftsman of Kazakhstan's successful multi-vector diplomacy. As a former Premier, Foreign Minister and Director General at the United Nations Office in Geneva, Tokayev is well known and respected in China, Russia, Europe and the United States and can accordingly reassure all the external partners that have a stake in the definition of Kazakhstan's international standing. At the core of his mission there is prolonging the **flexible posture** that has so far distinguished the country in order to continue to reap the economic benefits stemming from its extended web of relations.

At the same time, even for a specialist as Tokayev, it will be difficult to navigate through a transition that is taking place in a worsening regional background, where the mentioned powers are increasingly following mutually exclusive approaches in a climate of confrontation.

The way things went on the internal political scene in the initial phase of the transition will add complications. First, Tokayev took the quite awkward decisions to rename the capital as Nur-Sultan (after Nazarbayev's name) in honour of his predecessor. This, thwarting expectations for social and political reforms, contributed to provoke widespread protests across the country during the electoral process which brought to the formal investiture of the new President on 9 June. The unrest was exacerbated by the presence of an opposition candidate, Amirzhan Kossanov, who was widely assumed to run under a covert agreement with the establishment, according to a practice of manipulation of the oppositions which is traditional in the Kazakhstani model of "managed democracy". In addition, the way the **Akorda** (the presidential office) reacted to the protests, arresting

hundreds of manifestants, provoked strong reactions from the side of Western human rights watchdogs, including the EU Parliament.² The elections also received unusual criticism from the OSCE observers (as “tarnished by clear violations of fundamental freedoms”) while Tokayev got a score (70%) that even if dominant was well inferior to the performance of his predecessor.

As a result, the transition has revealed a number of gaps and fault lines in the system of power as it emerged over three decades of centralised rule and Tokayev will have to work in order to overcome a certain **crisis of legitimacy** of the State power. This is complicated by the unusual situation of double power that currently characterise the establishment. With the title of Elbasy, “leader of the nation”, the latter continues indeed to manage changes from behind the scenes as the lifetime chairman of the Security Council, an organ recently restructured to wield significant power in domestic affairs, notably in controlling security structures,³ and head of the ruling majoritarian “party of power”, Nur Otan. This situation represents an anomaly in a system which was previously used to function on a rigid vertical line of command (Kz.expert 2019). There, Nazarbayev was able to enforce discipline over manifold groups of power formed either around influent members of its inner circle or expressing existing regional and ethnic segmentations of the vast country. Now, the existence of a double line of command, one under an aging man, the other under his successor who is known for being a restrained and prudent decision maker, may tempt the different **groups of power** to manoeuvre to increase their relative position. It is not excluded that in doing this, some of these groups will search for the support of one the external players in order to reinforce their positions vis-à-vis of rivals referring to opposite external players. The period in review presented an episode that according to some national observers could be considered in this light. In contemporary with the start of the transition, one of the most reputed and respected national experts of China, **Konstantin Syroezhkin**, was arrested on charges of espionage (Abdykadyrova 2019). The episode was shadowy since Syroezhkin, who is well known to be close to Tokayev, possibly acting as his unofficial adviser, was detained in quite unusual circumstanc-

² See: *Human rights situation in Kazakhstan European Parliament resolution of 14 March 2019 on the human rights situation in Kazakhstan (2019/2610(RSP))*, URL http://europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0203_EN.html (2019-11-21).

³ Amendments to the Constitution of Kazakhstan introduced in 2017 provided for the transformation of the National Security Council from a consultative organ into a constitutional body. The lifelong Chairman has discretionary powers to instruct and delegate the government as well as the President in all “important issues”. Within this framework the authorities of the President were also reduced and redistributed between different branches of the government.

es, literally disappearing without official explanations for weeks. The operation was conducted by the intelligence service, the National Security Committee (KNB), a structure which, traditionally, serves as a platform for close relatives of Nazarbayev, currently Elbasý's nephew Samat Abish. To be noted also that the current KNB director is another close associate of Nazarbayev, Karim Massimov, who in the given period, has been very active in diplomatic demarches apt to reassure the country external patrons (he went to the US to meet Secretary Pompeo and to China).

Another important element of the transition apt to influence foreign policy in the near future is the entrance into the political scene of the younger, post-post-Soviet generation actor of the protests. This development reflected the shifting profile of the nation and reminded how expectations of change are widespread within the country. Protest concerned mainly internal policies but they could extend to question the system of alliances, first of all the positioning of Kazakhstan on a Sino-Russian axis, considered as a powerful anchorage of conservatism and guarantee of the status quo. Mostly educated in Western universities, the new leaders intended to lobby their position making active use of existing international instruments to which Kazakhstan has subscribed over the years. As reported to this author by one of the actors of the protests (for the civic movement *Oyan, Qazaqstan*, "Wake Up, Kazakhstan"), if Tokayev will not establish with the new forces an effective dialogue on substantial reform of the electoral and political system, his legitimacy as national leader will further suffer as pressure from the side of Western partners will become more structured (Alzhanov 2019).

Apart from the new generation, another constituency that is expected to push for changes in the foreign policy's sphere is that of ethnic Kazakh nationalists. The latter since years are vocal in asking a revision in the relations of Kazakhstan with both Russia and China (Stronski 2019). One of the main issues for the future of Kazakhstan's place in the world will be the way how these forces will find a common articulation for similar demands. These processes will be difficult since they will take place against a background of reduced economic expectations which will push up popular discontent unless the ruling elite will find ways to improve social services and tackle the endemic corruption and the growing wealth gaps that are widespread in the country.

2 Russia: Set to Remain the Main Partner on the Basis of a Common Vision but with Increasing Strain

As mentioned, Nazarbayev's choice of Tokayev to lead the transition of Kazakhstani power was to a large extent conceived to offer guarantees of political continuity to Moscow, symbolically, the destination of the first visit abroad the new leader.

Kazakhstan's importance for the current foreign policy of the Kremlin cannot be underestimated. First, geopolitically, the country is interconnected with a large strip of Russian territories and it serves as such as the Russian gate to Central Asia and a common neighbourhood with China. Second, the membership of Kazakhstan is the key to keep running the two main Russian sponsored integration structures for the post-Soviet space, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Of no less importance is that Nur-Sultan has provided important diplomatic support in moderating different conflict situations where the interests of Russia are at play (see final paragraph for details). From Kazakhstan's perspective, multilateral engagement represents a guarantee to be treated by Moscow as a relevant regional partner in a rules-based context which, especially after the fears raised by the situation in Ukraine, removes the basis for any scenario of separatism in the northern regions inhabited by ethnic Russians. In addition, facing the raising clout of China across their borders, both countries are eager to use the common frame of the EEU to articulate the development of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in a way to contain Chinese influence in the post-Soviet space. The importance of the EEU has also been mentioned as a platform to work on the improvement of Russian relations with Europe (Perović 2019).

Given the general positive background underpinning Russian-Kazakhstani relations, at the same time, there are also a number of factors that in a context of political transition can play a negative role in the development of this crucial bilateral relationship.

Still focusing on the EEU, given economic problems caused by the Russian crisis and trade regulations which occasionally play against Kazakhstani interests, the rationale for EEU has already been the object of critics. This was evident especially in the 2014-16 period, when, on the background of the degeneration of events in Ukraine, different nationalist figures called for a "Kazakexit" from the EEU (Chebotarev 2016). This appeal did not attract too much attention at the time, as it went from mostly marginal figures, to some extent assessed to be manipulated by the top leadership in the framework of power strategies. The situation could look differently in the years to come in case of a welding between these actors and the new generation's representatives.

Related to this is the fact that, overall, the extensive coordination of the two countries' positions has been due to a large extent to the personal entente between the two presidents, Putin and Nazarbayev, who meeting frequently made plain all possible issues as they arose. Also a big part of the internal appeal of the EEU was strictly associated with the figure of Nazarbayev. Lacking this personal factor, reaching smooth solutions may become more complicated, especially since a number of issues may become in the coming month object of dispute. For instance, Russia and Kazakhstan reached recently an agreement to have a nuclear power plant built by Russia but the site, on the Lake Balkhash, is described as ecologically fragile.

Since the last two years, larger issues, which Moscow points out with apprehension as sign of evolving pro-Western evolutions of Kazakhstan, are entering in influencing the status of the bilateral relationship. One of them is the Kazakhstani plan to switch the script of the language from Cyrillic to Latin alphabet. Also, at the beginning of 2018 Nazarbayev announced that the government was going to work exclusively in Kazakh (Reuters, 2018). This year, Russian media reported with concern about the circulation of a documentary film about the famine which ravaged Kazakhstan in the 1930s. Narrated by a nationalist leader, the film presents the results of the politics of the Communist authorities as a Moscow-organized terror against ethnic Kazakhs. A secure boost for Kazakh nationalists' activism, the film is expected to trigger conflict between ethnic Kazakhs and Russians (Bogdanovich, 2019). Overall, ethnic Russians of Kazakhstan tend to live with apprehension the exit of Nazarbayev, a figure they perceived as a guarantee of their positions in society and, according to some reports (Globe 2019), are set to emigrate, thus further contributing to the observed trends toward nationalisation of the country's political outlook.

These developments are cause of particular alarm in Moscow because they tend to be associated with a rise of American influence expected to result in an increased military cooperation (see next paragraph), up to the inclusion of the neighbour into the structures of NATO, Russian *bête noire* across the whole Post-Soviet space. Russian analyst are plain on the fact that a similar development will be considered as "simply unacceptable" in force of the spatial interconnection of the territories of the two states (sharing 7.5 thousand km of border), and the importance of the Russian military infrastructure on Kazakhstani soil (Petrosyan 2019).

Current rifts are mendable since Kazakhstani-Russian relations are embedded in a solid positive perception from the side of the mass of the population, among whom no other country causes so much sympathy as Russia (Shibutov et al. 2018). Also Western conducted social polls concluded that "the US presence in Kazakhstan will receive approval only if Washington is acting in partnership with Russia, at least not in conflict with it" (Laruelle, Royce 2019). Also nota-

ble in assessing the Russian-Kazakhstani relationship and the way it will evolve is how Russian media are paramount in shaping perceptions in Kazakhstan of world affairs. In a time of power transition, the sway hold by Moscow based media to influence Kazakh public opinion will make that any emerging Kazakhstani elite will strive to get Russian favour in their bid for national political power.

3 Chinese Challenges

The new Kazakhstani establishment will face no less challenge in managing their relations with China. The growth of Chinese interests has been constant over the years and is set to increase further since Kazakhstan became a key trading and investment partner of the Chinese “One Belt, One Road Initiative” – or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In the latter’s framework, Kazakhstan is one of the main corridors to Russia and then Europe – Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) component – Chinese financed infrastructure development has been integrated in the Kazakhstani national program “Nurly Zhol” with over \$5 billion in investment, peer to 4 percent of GDP (International Monetary Fund, 2018).

Such an economic overhaul in bilateral relations cannot pass without problems. For instance, the increased influx of Chinese firms and economic interests inside the republic resulted in a mass of requests for labour visas which authorities in Nur-Sultan are trying to limit. Overall, the growing Chinese presence tends to be perceived as negative and threatening. There is a traditional background of synophobia typical of Central Asian nomads for such feelings, but the real point is that the last two years have been marked by the introduction by Beijing of particular harsh policies to curb separatist groups in Kazakhstan’s neighbouring region of Xinjiang. Chinese reaction entailed mass arrests and a system of “re-education camps” estimated to hold hundreds of thousands, including along local Uighurs a number of ethnic Kazakhs. Alive reports from refugees about the Chinese treatment of locals are appalling (Salomatin; Burtin 2019) and will for sure have an effect in the definition not only of the relations with the neighbors but also on internal balances. There is indeed a tendency to have anti-Chinese sentiments translated into anti-government attitudes since, given the untransparent way many transactions with China are effectuated, there are widespread suspicions that the corrupt national bureaucracy is selling out national sovereignty. An example of the implications of this was visible in 2016 when a land privatisation decree, which was expected to have Chinese as the main beneficiaries, quickly engendered mass protests of vast sectors of the population forcing the authorities to backtrack on it.

Thus, the Chinese challenge of Nur-Sultan will require an attentive policy. It is likely that the entity of the task will act as another factor maintaining momentum of the EEU vector of integration, the Russian balance being identified as the only possible alternative to a predominance of the Chinese power. Being such a dread shared by Russian and Kazakh elites, balancing Chinese assertiveness with a common approach seems to be the only way to run. In a best case scenario, the EEU framework integrates both the “Nurly Zhol” and SREB infrastructure plans in a way to allow Kazakhstan to act as a bridge between China and Russia in a multidimensional network of intercontinental economic cooperation (Kukeyeva; Dyussebayev 2019).

Among the many preparatory works to attain similar results, Kazakhstan needs to develop more in-house knowledge about China. Still it lacks a think-tank devoted to the country and a school of sinologists. A Chinese-speaking President is a good sign for the future but this is offset by the mentioned arrest of the main recognised expert on China.

4 Kazakhstan and the “West”

Kazakhstani relations with the different Western actors are set to remain dynamic and subject to changes according to the posture assumed by the USA. Under the Trump Administration, Washington has tended to disengage from Central Asia, this meaning the weakening of one the pillars on which the “multi-vector” balancing act of Nur-Sultan’s diplomacy. What it results is a relationship with the USA under quite ambivalent terms. From one side the Akorda finds a better counterpart among Trump’s Republicans, as they are less concerned with democratisation issues than the Democrats. On the other hand, Trump did not (or was not in a position to) express a cut with the line of US global hegemony but, quite on the opposite, started an economic confrontation with China in addition to the military/political opposition with Russia. In such a conjuncture, Nur-Sultan, with its unique strategic position sharing extended borders with both rivals of America, is set to be object of particular attention in the latter’s grand strategy. In particular, Kazakhstan has been quite extensively involved in cooperation with NATO. Despite the anti-Russian character, of the latter, Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian nation that signed with the Alliance an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IP-AP) and then engaged in a Planning and Review Process (PARP) allowing NATO access to national Armed Forces to develop interoperability for training and operations (Mukhtorova 2018). NATO also would like to use Nur-Sultan to host a rotating Contact Point Embassy (CPE) for Alliance liaison with the region.

NATO is just one of several elements of nuisance which Washington strives to introduce in Nur-Sultan's relations with the neighbouring powers. There is also at play a quite systematic information campaign against the EEU regional integration project, intended to instil among the public a sense of threat coming from Russia.⁴ The same with regards of China, as it was visible during the meeting of Kazakhstani National Security Committee Chairman Masimov with US Secretary of State Pompeo, when the host emphasised Chinese treatment of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang, conveying the United States' strong support for those affected.⁵ And, of course, the US adversely impact Kazakhstan relations with Iran, whose potential in term of energy deals and infrastructure connexion is frozen by effects of the US policies against Teheran.

Accordingly, it can be expected that the USA will continue to make use of all possible leverages to influence Kazakhstani position. To assess this potential of influence one should take into account that since the start of the oil boom, the Nazarbayev regime has put consistent capitals into banks accounts controlled by the US. Since the end of the 1990s, as then visible with the so-called "Kazakhgate" affair, this may exploited by Washington.⁶ Another reminder of US financial leverage on Kazakhstan went to the news at the end of 2017, when \$ 22 billion of the National Sovereign Fund of Kazakhstan (about 17% of the country's GDP) were blocked in the Bank of New York Mellon over a lawsuit launched by a Moldovan businessman (Alksnis 2018). Despite official denials, the common sense is that the issue was solved with the visit of Nazarbayev to Washington in January 2018 directly in talks with Donald Trump (Panfilova 2018).

Financial dependence on Western sources will likely become more relevant in influencing the future positioning of Kazakhstan since the country is expected to look for additional international investments this year: three major national companies – Kazakhtelecom, KazMu-

4 This is especially visible on the Russian-speaking internet resource published by the Central Command of the US Armed Forces (CENTCOM) "Karavansaray", see for instance: *Uskorennoye predstavleniye rossiyskogo grazhdanstva separatistam stalo trevozhnym signalom dlya Tsentral'noy Azii*, URL http://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2019/05/13/feature-01 (2019-11-21).

5 URL <https://kz.usembassy.gov/secretary-pompeos-meeting-with-karim-masimov-kazakhstani-national-security-committee-chairman> (2019-11-21).

6 The case sparked around the figure of James H. Giffen, an US business consultant and CIA informant since Soviet times who was hired by the Kazakhstan government as oil negotiator with foreign companies. Giffen was said to have supervised the transfer of more than \$78 million in secret Swiss counts at the disposal of Nazarbayev and then prime minister, Nurlan Balgimbayev. In the trial indicted by the US Justice Department, Giffen asserted that he was acting with the approval of the CIA, which refused to disclose details relating to his activities. At the same time he was released without prison nor fines in 2010 (LeVine 2010).

naGas, and Air Astana – are expected to hold IPOs, while Kazatom-prom nuclear power company continues its privatization. As a diplomat and prime minister, Tokayev has frequently taken part in other efforts foreign financial presence in national business (Shatalov 2019).

Last but not least, a factor of influence is represented by the action of the main opponent of the regime, Muktar Abliazov, in exile in Europe. The French government refused the extradition of the billionaire who is thus allowed conducting a harsh political campaign aimed at de-legitimization of Tokayev and the whole country's power system. Even after having lost his previous media platforms, Abliazov seems able to steer protests up simply realising live appeals on Facebook and Youtube. This action remains as a considerable factor of irritation in the Kazakhstani-Western relations.

It is difficult to assess which kind of public sentiments towards the West will dominate in the future. US policy is regularly criticised and anti-Western sentiments are fed not only by Russian and Chinese sources but also Turkish ones since the deterioration of the latter's ties with Washington following the failed coup of 2016. On the other hand, recalling the ongoing generational change factor, it should be observed that a great part of the future Kazakhstani élite have been educated in US or British universities, a fact that provide a considerable element of soft power in Western hands.⁷

Kazakhstan would like to compensate US defaillances with its relations with the European Union's (EU), for which it has so far been the main Central Asian partner. Kazakhstan has enthusiastically welcomed this year the introduction of a New EU Strategy for Central Asia (Gotev 2019). "Connectivity", one of the key elements of the document, is particularly appreciated, again, as another element to balance the impact of the Chinese BRI. Although they are important economic partner for Kazakhstan, the Europeans do not have capacities to play a geopolitical role outside of NATO and other institutions shared with the US. However, as source of almost half of Kazakhstan's foreign direct investment (FDI) and an important source of technology, the EU has a potential to play in influencing the future trajectory of the country, especially if it will be able to balance the effects of US geopolitical gaming.

⁷ The issue can be gauged observing statistics related to 9,645 young specialists who made use of the State "Bolashak" programme of scholarships over 24 years of its implementation. For instance the 1.258 currently studyresults to be thus distributed: 55% in universities of Great Britain and Ireland, 31.6%, in the USA and Canada, 6% in countries of continental Europe, 4% in the Russian Federation, 3.4% Asia and Oceania. See: *Mezhdunarodnaya stipendiya*, in «Bolashak», <https://bolashak.gov.kz/ru/o-stipendii/istoriya-razvitiya.html>.

5 The “New” Uzbekistan and the Central Asian Dimension

A positive element for Kazakhstani transition comes from the Central Asian theatre of its regional environment. Here, changes of great momentum are resulting from the new course of foreign policy Uzbekistan after the country's autocrat Islam Karimov passed away in 2016. Previously isolated, Tashkent is now actively engaging with its neighbors in order to create a regional environment of cooperation. Kazakhstan assisted in this effort organising in 2018 the first summit of the Central Asian countries in nine years. Tokayev signalled his will to continue in this direction visiting Uzbekistan, immediately after Russia, still in his acting capacities last April. With his colleague Shavkat Mirziyoev, Tokayev agreed an ambitious program of bilateral cooperation covering almost all aspects of the relationship and notably aiming at raising the volume of mutual trade from the current three billion dollars to five over the next two years, with the current one declared as the “Year of Kazakhstan in Uzbekistan” (Alтынbayev 2019).

The two heads of state also discussed issues of regional and international cooperation and this opens a great potential to structure a Central Asian platform putting the region in a position to balance between Russia, China and the USA.⁸ A similar format may receive support from other regional actors as India, increasingly active in regional affairs, also in order to provide a regional contribution to the normalisation of the situation in Afghanistan.⁹

So far so good, but, already on the medium term, the process of opening of Uzbekistan may rise the profile of the country making again of it the fulcrum and the core area for the whole region in a way that may adversely impact on the interests of Kazakhstan. Notably, Uzbekistani intention to move towards an open, export-oriented economy will make the two neighbours competitors in attracting international investments towards their national economies. Such a scenario can become real in case of complications in the process of power succession in Kazakhstan, what can be expected to keep Nur-Sultan partially aside from the main regional processes for the years to come.

⁸ See for an internal assessment the interview with Deputy Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan, Mr. Roman Vassilenko (2019).

⁹ *Uzbekistan i Kazakhstan obsudili situatsiyu v Afganistane*, «REGNUM», 7 April 2019, URL <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2606854.html> (2019-11-21).

6 Perspectives for Maintaining Kazakhstan's Role as a Global Mediator

Since the start of its independence, Kazakhstan has always presented itself as an active promoter of peace and stability not only at regional level but with the ambition to play at the global level. Indeed, under Nazarbayev, the country has been able to reap undoubtful diplomatic successes having resonance well beyond the Central Asian framework. Notable case is the **Conference on Interaction and Confidence-building measures in Asia** (CICA), an organization which was launched by Kazakhstan in 1992 to function as an Asian equivalent on the same principles of the OSCE. The CICA currently unites 27 countries, from Israel, and Iran, to Vietnam and China. It held recently its fifth congress in Dushambe, Tajikistan, still short of the overall ambitious aim to create a unified Eurasian security system where Kazakhstan will have a central position but proving vital as a conference for Heads of State - the presidents of 12 states gathered including Iran and Turkey (Imanaliev 2019).

Apart from CICA, Kazakhstan delivered on its ambition to be an actor of world politics serving as rotating chairman of the OSCE in 2010 and being in 2017-18 a member of the United Nations Security Council, where Astana managed to bring regional issues usually marginal to global agenda. As recalled recently in a national publication (Kurmashev and Akhmed'yanova, 2018, 45), apart from the mentioned formats, Kazakhstan diplomacy's steps to promote collective peace and security include:

- Mediation between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and in Tajikistan during the civil war in the 1990s.
- The practice (since 2003) to convene the Congress of Leaders world and traditional religions, which gathers authoritative representatives of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Shintoism, Hinduism and Buddhism for interfaith dialogue.
- Facilitation of negotiations on Iran's nuclear capacities - with two rounds of talks between Iran and the P5 + 1 group organised in Almaty (February and May 2013).
- Nazarbayev's role in the normalization of the Russian-Turkish relations following the November 2015 crisis between the two countries (downing of a Russian plane by Turkey).
- Contribution to the settlement of the Syrian conflicts with the creation of the Astana format for inter-Syrian negotiations including representatives of the Syrian opposition.

The country keeps on introducing visionary schemes for international relations. The latest of Nazarbayev's initiatives proposed a regional dialogue at three levels, which he called the **3D**. This comprises a first level of dialogue among the regional four big players: United

States, EU, Russia and China. Next, interaction between the CICA and the OSCE and, third, a more economy-focused dialogue on cooperation between the EU, the EEU, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and ASEAN.

Despite hesitations and difficulties unavoidable in setting up similar diplomatic exercises, national diplomats are confident that results may be reached, with the OSCE and CICA planning to meet, first at expert levels and then higher levels, to exchange best practices and to establish dialogue, hopefully this year. Indeed, similar schemes of cooperation could become the political backbone of the New Silk Road's efforts (Gotev 2019).

In such a perspective, Kazakhstan can effectively play a role in recomposing relations between Russia, the EU and the United States, also by way of its active presence in theatres relevant for the three actors as Afghanistan and Georgia, where Kazakhstani diplomats are striving their best to reduce tensions between that country and Russia.

7 Conclusions

Having provided a survey of the multiple challenges pending over the foreign policy of Kazakhstan, it is clear that the exercise of multi-vectoriality will become an increasingly complicated one. Tokayev will have to make the best use of his diplomatic capacities to navigate between diverging geopolitical vectors and he will find increasingly difficult to play foreign partners off each other as it was in the heyday of Nazarbayev's era.

Certainly, Kazakhstan will have to devote efforts at avoiding to irritate Russia, whose cooperation will remain vital for the country's prosperity. The northern neighbour has a vital interest in the stability of Kazakhstan and hence it can be assumed that it will not try to excessively to manipulate the Kazakhstani transition in order to avoid shocks in the energy flows, migrations and border conflicts that will immediately reverberate on Russia. At the same time, Moscow cannot tolerate insertion of foreign security actors on Kazakhstani territory and if the new elite will make concessions on this the consequences could be extremely destabilising.

To this regard, one of the greatest challenges for Kazakhstan will be in composing the complex web of the different vectors of Western influence on the government and society. In particular, the unknown quantity of Nur-Sultan diplomatic equation will remain the position of the USA which, in case of perduring confrontation with its two main neighbours, may be tempted to interfere with their interests using through it. Indeed, unrest in Kazakhstan may undermine overall Russian security posture as well as Chinese investment

and infrastructure strategy for Eurasia. The same can be true with regards of Iran through the Caspian.

Hence, it will be essential how Kazakhstan will be able to perform its balancing act to integrate Russian and Chinese vectors, receiving their security guarantees, realising some degree of integration with both systems while at the same time preserving a meaningful sovereignty and autonomy for Kazakhstan. Of paramount importance will be how Russia and Kazakhstan will update the mechanisms of their integration, in order to make of the EEU a structure benefitting the larger number of domestic economic players. The importance of the EEU will also be in its potential of reducing geopolitical competition between Russia and the EU, a direction where Kazakhstan could in fact play an intermediary role. Finding in this a synergy with the potential of the Belt and Road initiative, a new dynamic could emerge on the Eurasian continent matching economic forces along the infrastructure corridors to the benefit of all.

However, to reach such goals, which would render the best honour to the heritage of Nazarbayev, the new establishment will have to profuse no lesser efforts in work inside the country. Much will depend on the outcome of modernization and how demands coming from an evolving society will be addressed. Apart from demands for a more open and pluralist political system, a crucial issue will be the further articulation and definition of the national identity. Will this be defined in ethnic terms or a Kazakhstani civic shared identity? A lot in defining the future of Kazakhstan will depend from the answer to this question and how it will be articulated with the internal struggle of the different groups of powers when “the Leader of the Nation” will not be in a position to balance their interaction anymore (Sataev 2019). Then, the possibility of having opposition forces or some power elite playing on the nationalist card will represent a real danger for the future of the country as it will push non-Kazakh out of the country putting in jeopardy both the strategy of modernization and the balanced diplomacy underpinning it. Much will then depend on the qualities that Tokayev will show as politician and head of state. Here one can measure the scale of the risk associated with the succession to Nazarbaev and the limits of a model built around such a strict pyramid of power. Accordingly, the crucial issue for Kazakhstan and its position in the world will reside in the capacity that the establishment will prove at defining a new ‘social contract’ between the state and the society, apt to reflect the demographic, ethnical and cultural evolutions of the latter (Laruelle; Boonstra 2018). Hence, the importance of instauring now effective mechanisms of dialogue so that to involve the largest number of constituencies in such a definition as well as to make the public understand what is really at stake in the relationship with the country’s external partners.

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