



Making Sense of the Recent Unrest in Kazakhstan

Geopolitics Task Force Brief

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Background

- On [January 2 \(Sunday\)](#), a spike in liquified petroleum gas (LPG) prices triggered protests in Zhanaozen⁸, a city located in oil-rich Western part of the country. The protests quickly spilled over to other cities in the western oil region and then to the whole country to include the capital Nur-Sultan and Almaty. The protests about gas prices turned into venues to voice long-standing grievances regarding backwardness of the region, inequality in distribution of wealth, and inability of the leaders to resolve their problems.
- On [January 5 \(Wednesday\)](#), violent clashes began. The peaceful protests across the country were eclipsed by vexing scenes of unrest, featuring looting, vandalizing, and storming government buildings. Reportedly, violent organized groups overtook the movement even seizing the airport. The president declared a two-week [state-of-emergency](#). In the same day, the President stripped his predecessor, Nursultan [Nazarbayev](#) of his role as leader of the security council and accepted the government's resignation.
- Early on [January 6 \(Thursday\)](#), President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev said in a televised statement: *"Today I appealed to the heads of **CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organisation)** states to **assist Kazakhstan in overcoming this terrorist threat.**"* The same day, Russian troops helped recapture of the airport from protesters. According to [local media](#), as many as **3000 troops** – approximately [100 Armenian](#) - were quickly deployed to Kazakhstan.
- On [January 7 \(Friday\)](#), the President Tokayev said *"Terrorists continue to damage public and private property and use weapons against citizens. I gave the order to law enforcement agencies and the army **to shoot to kill without warning.**"*
- As of [January 9 \(Sunday\)](#), the situation was calm across the country. The office of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev said the order was restored. According to official statements of Kazakh authorities, 164 people were killed and 5800 people were detained during the unrest.
- On [January 11 \(Monday\)](#), Tokayev announced: "The main mission of the CSTO peacekeeping forces has been successfully completed" and they will be expected to **leave within 2 days.**

Analysis

1. Global Context of Russia – NATO Competition

While protests were wreaking havoc in major cities in Kazakhstan just after the new year began, Russian Diplomacy was busy with trying to keep NATO off the Russia's western borders whereas Russian Army was massing 100,000 to 175,000 troops in and around Ukraine allegedly in preparation to a massive military offensive against Kyiv, [according to the intelligence reports](#). Military analysts assessed that [a military operation was imminent](#), given the size, composition, and deployment of the Russian forces.

On the fourth day of the protests (6 January 2022) President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev appealed to the CSTO for assistance in dealing with “terrorist threat” and for the first time since its 1994 founding, [the CSTO has agreed to deploy forces to a member state](#). Russia responded Tokayev’s request by [redeploying some units \(nearly 2,500 personnel\) from Western Military District \(Ukraine front\) to Kazakhstan](#).

On 17 December 2021, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published [a draft treaty](#) and [a draft agreement](#) to be negotiated with the United States and NATO respectively. The draft documents aim to prevent NATO’s eastward expansion and deny NATO membership of ex-Soviet states. They seek to limit deployment of strategic air, navy, and army assets as well as ground-based missiles around Russian “near abroad” including Baltic and Black Seas. Russia also wants to curb deploying nuclear weapons outside U.S., in other words, asking U.S. leaving its “extended nuclear deterrence” assurances that it provided for its Allies. Russia also demands a halt to NATO enlargement. To address these developments, NATO held an extraordinary meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs on 07 January 2022 and, had a NATO – Ukraine Commission meeting on 10 January 2022. On the very same day Russia and U.S. delegations met at Geneva. Today (12 January 2022) a NATO – Russia Council is scheduled, a rare gathering coincided with the first MC/CS (Military Committee in Chiefs of Defence Session) of 2022, both to be held at NATO Headquarters in Brussels. And finally, diplomatic blitzkrieg will continue with an OSCE meeting on Thursday in Vienna.

At the end of the day, Kazakhstan, a valued PfP (Partnership for Peace) country and an important NATO partner in Central Asia found itself placed besides Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia that has Russian troop presence on its soil.

2. Local Context and Dynamics of the Unrest

In March 2019, Nursultan Nazarbayev relinquished his 29-year presidency, handing over the reins of power to his chosen successor Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Nazarbayev retained the title “Elbasy” (Leader of the Nation), remained Chairman of the Security Council, and continued to be active on the international scene. This quasi co-leadership resulted in an uneasy sharing of the spotlight, but the situation appeared manageable. Until recently, the Kazakh situation had been considered an example of a successful and peaceful transition of power in the region.

Kazakhstan is now under a state of emergency with foreign troops in the country organized under the aegis of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Those CSTO troops are there at the request of President Tokayev, but CSTO notably denied similar requests for aid made by Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and Armenia in 2021—two countries that do not border Russia.

The crisis began with protests over the Kazakh government’s decision to deregulate gas prices by removing subsidies. Market forces rapidly doubled prices. These protests were the catalyst, but they soon evolved into demonstrations over political conditions more generally. Protestors around the country shouted [“Shal ket,” “Old man, out”](#) some as they tore down a statue of former president Nursultan Nazarbayev, set fire to official buildings, and engaged in looting. The protests began in the western city of Zhanaozen, spreading quickly across the country and were especially intense in the country’s largest city, Almaty. Law enforcement initially used tear gas and stun grenades on the crowds, but that escalated on January 7th when President Tokayev gave orders to [“shoot to kill.”](#)

President Tokayev did attempt to quell the disquiet by accepting the [government’s resignation](#) -- including sacking Karim Masimov, then head of the powerful National Security Committee, and detaining him on suspicion of treason, assuming control of the Security Council from Nazarbayev, and extending the price controls on gas for 180 days. However, Tokayev also restricted [internet](#)

[access](#) presumably in an attempt to keep citizens from organizing and stoked stories of violence against police to include beheadings. Approximately 8,000 citizens were [arrested](#) as Tokayev used television to communicate that the [country was under attack](#) by “international terrorist gangs, who trained abroad.” CSTO members, Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, immediately responded to Tokayev’s request for security assistance, [sending troops](#) “to stabilize and normalize the situation” for a “limited” amount of time.

By January 10th, Tokayev was using the phrase [“coup attempt”](#) to describe the threat to his regime, which he described as representative of “the aggression of international terrorism”. Speaking at an online meeting of the CSTO, [Vladimir Putin](#) showed ostensible support for Tokayev by referring to the agitators in Kazakhstan as “destructive internal-external forces”—trained in foreign centers—who had taken advantage of the situation that broke out with the shift in gas prices. As Tokayev and Putin conjure up images of a color revolution in the making, one outstanding matter is the whereabouts of former president Nazarbayev. Unconfirmed rumors have it that he is either dead or has escaped with his family. In fact, that very speculation sparked attacks on the airport, as protestors attempted to prevent Nazarbayev’s fleeing the country.

The situation with the Internet is still problematic, although it improved slightly since last week. Now there is sporadic internet access, but since January 2nd Kazakhstanis have not had a day when the connection was available for the entire day. On January 11, the Parliament approved Tokayev’s new Prime Minister, Alikhan Smailov. It is yet to be seen whether the government will rise to the challenge and promote genuine reforms; at the same time, the President did outline some of the priorities that resonate with the public, such as fighting corruption at the Chinese border, dealing with corruption more generally, and addressing social inequalities. The new Prime Minister has three weeks to come up with a new strategy for the country. For now, due to the ongoing anti-terror operation, everything is heavily monitored so people are cautious about what they say and publish – the emergency situation gives the security services additional powers to detain people on accounts of “spreading falsified information”.

In September 2019, Kazakhstan’s second president had announced his concept of the [“Listening State”](#) in order to respond to the needs of his people. He also promised continuity with the Nazarbayev regime even as he vowed reform. None of that has satisfied the public. Tokayev announced on January 11th, “the main mission of the [CSTO](#) peacekeeping forces has been successfully completed” and they will be expected to begin leaving in 2 days. The question now is whether Tokayev can stay in power, and if he does, the degree to which he will rely on Moscow in the future.

3. Russian Intervention Playbook

The timing and playbook of Russia's engagement in the nation reveal Moscow's geopolitical calculations as well as hints about what to anticipate in the area going forward. Unlike the former Russian interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, the unique aspect in this case is the involvement of Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Accordingly, CSTO intervention was explicitly [requested](#) by Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in contrast to Russia's actions in Georgia and Ukraine. The international aspect of this action is noteworthy, since it is [the first joint deployment](#) of CSTO forces in the security bloc's 30-year existence. Yet, this unique aspect does not necessarily mean that the Russian-led deployment in Kazakhstan does not have striking similarities to Russia's military operations in Ukraine and Georgia.

The main root causes of any Russian intervention in the post-Soviet region remain the same: maintain internal political stability, protect itself from hostile neighbors or external forces, and

consolidate its regional dominance while limiting rivals'. To address these issues, in some cases Russia intervenes to prevent former Soviet countries moving westward, in others Russia consolidates its power in sphere of influence by protecting or supporting pro-Russian governance. For instance, while Russia invaded Georgia and Ukraine to subvert pro-Western governments that were opposed to Russian interests, Moscow's CSTO action in Kazakhstan is the opposite: it is supporting a pro-Russian administration that is strategically aligned with Moscow.

Further, Russia also wants to communicate a message that it is prepared to take action to prevent such violent turmoil and political chaos from erupting in other Moscow-friendly countries, as well as on Russian soil. From this point of view, Russian perception of Kazakhstan is better explained by a fear of regime change through what can be seen as street protests than by the fear of NATO's and the EU's expansion or moving westward.

Without significant economic or political blowback from the West, following Tokayev's request, Russia moved quickly and firmly to bring in CSTO forces. The Russia-led CSTO intervention gives Russia the opportunity to reassure Kazakhstan's ethnic Russian majority and to extend its power grid across the country. Further, Russia has placed pressure on the post-Soviet governments not to strengthen connections with the West or China; and it has sent a clear message to the people of the countries in Russian interest areas.

4. Repercussions on the US Position and Policy Priorities in the Region

The American government's response to the political crisis in Kazakhstan in early January 2022 has the potential to set relations between Washington and Nur-Sultan back considerably. For three decades, the United States and Kazakhstan have maintained productive working relations. In addition to playing a leading role in raising awareness about the importance of [nuclear security](#), Kazakhstan under the leadership of the First President Nursultan Nazarbayev assisted the United States in the Global War on Terror in various ways (most noticeably by accepting several (former) detainees from [Guantanamo Bay](#) for resettlement, as well as by participating in the (defunct) Northern Distribution Network). Furthermore, existing ["linkages"](#) between the United States and the Central Asian republics have never been nearly as strong as the multiple ties which serve to bind the "Stans" to Russia, and the U.S. government has never made democracy promotion a top priority in Central Asia. Western powers also did not vociferously express displeasure with Kazakhstan's suppression of the mass protests that gripped the country in [2019](#), but apparently the Biden administration has taken a hard stance against Tokayev's controversial ["shoot to kill"](#) order in furtherance of pacifying Almaty.

Bearing all this in mind, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's [recent comments](#) about the Russian-led CSTO military intervention in Kazakhstan may well be construed by Nur-Sultan as insulting and offensive. Kazakhstan and Russia are military allies, and although the situation remains somewhat fluid, it appears that President Kassym-Jomart [Tokayev](#) requested that the CSTO intervene to help foil an attempted coup and restore order in Almaty and elsewhere. Going forward, even if the CSTO military force departs from Kazakhstan within the coming weeks, it is obvious that Nur-Sultan is now facing an indefinite period of restricted sovereignty to some unknown degree. It is on this point that the United States should concentrate its diplomatic energies. Washington should make use of its diplomatic channels to express its resolute support for Kazakhstan's sustained sovereignty.

5. What Now for Europe

Although the relations between the EU and the Central Asian countries were weak until recently, those of Kazakhstan are the most developed and the EU is by far Kazakhstan's main trading and investment partner. It might be useful to highlight the EU and Kazakhstan have signed Enhanced

Partnership and Cooperation Agreement⁹ (EPCA) in 2015, the first and the only agreement of this kind between the EU and the Central Asian countries. Although there are other provisions within the agreement, EPCA mostly governs trade and economic relations between the EU and Kazakhstan. The EU has very few instruments, if any, to influence the developments in Kazakhstan. There were a handful of (written) statements from the EU as the manifestations began in Kazakhstan and they were all conciliatory in form, mostly calling the demonstrators not to change the course and go violent. One can assume that the EU feared that violent protests might change the status quo and its economic interests in Kazakhstan.

All in all, the EU has no instruments and willingness to intervene, yet, does not opt for a change in the status quo.

6. How will Energy Sector Be Affected from the Unrest?

The unrest in Kazakhstan will not significantly affect the geo-economics of the energy sector, although it is anticipated that high-level personnel changes will be instituted in response to popular discontent with fuel prices. Given the current geo-economics of the sector, it is unlikely that current investments from any party will be significantly affected. China has been already heavily invested in Kazakhstan's energy sector for many years. Russia and Kazakhstan already have very well institutionalized energy cooperation in the Caspian offshore, not to mention the transit of Tengiz crude across southern Russia to the Black Sea port of Novorossiisk for export to world markets. Kazakhstan also has other well established energy-sector cooperation with both Russia and China already, some of it even on a trilateral basis.

Strategic Foresight

The protests that shook Kazakhstan in the last 10 days will have a lasting legacy for the country and beyond in the region. Although various scenarios are being on what really happened in different circles, it is enough to look at who gained what from what happened. As it is clear now, Tokayev has eliminated Nursultan Nazarbayev, who had become a burden with his extensive control over state and extensions within state assets. The purge of officials close to Nazarbayev such as Karim Masimov will likely continue in the coming days if not months. Tokayev will likely start with security officials that he could not rely on during the unrest. It is yet to be seen whether the new Alikhan Smailov government will rise to the challenge of fighting corruption and addressing social inequalities, and promoting genuine reforms.

Russia has been a “net winner” in the affair. We might assume that as of today Tokayev's future is not in the Kazak's people hands but is in the hands of Putin. Without the shadow of Nazarbayev but under Putin's control, Tokayev is likely to become a meta version of Putin in Kazakhstan who will make Kazakhstan more dependent on Russia.

Without a significant economic or political blowback from the West, the CSTO intervention has given Russia the opportunity to reassure Kazakhstan's ethnic Russian majority and to extend its power across the country. Further, Russia has placed pressure on the post-Soviet governments not to strengthen connections with the West or China; and it has sent a clear message to the people of these countries about the Russian decisiveness in pursuing its interest in the post-Soviet regimes. The same message has been sent to NATO and the West that it is committed to *consolidate its regional dominance while limiting rivals*.

Although Moscow has demonstrated a persistent willingness to employ military force to defend its position in former Soviet space, such actions are prone to have unanticipated and far-reaching

repercussions. If Russian-led CSTO troops fail to calm the situation and restore order in Kazakhstan—and maybe other CSTO hotspots in the future—the Kremlin's own reputation, both at home and in the post-Soviet area, might suffer severely. Therefore, it is highly likely that CSTO troops and Tokayev's security forces will not hesitate to quell the situation violently.

The Biden administration and the U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken have taken a hard stance against Tokayev's controversial actions during the unrest, to include “shoot to kill” order. When the dust settles, the US will likely make use of its diplomatic channels to express its resolute support for Kazakhstan's sustained sovereignty.

Throughout the unrest, the EU has not shown a conspicuous stance. As long as its economic interests are not at stake, the EU will likely follow the same course of action.

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⁸ The city of Zhanaozen had witnessed a similar protest ten years ago in December 2011 where security forces opened fire on protesters, killing 16.

⁹ EPCA was applied provisionally from 2016 until it was fully ratified and entered into force in 2020.