

Understanding Kazakhstan's Middle Power Strategy

BY: Miras Zhiyenbayev - The Astana Times



Kazakhstan has emerged as a pivotal player in the region. Its geographical position, bordering both Russia and China, not only makes it a land bridge connecting different parts of the Eurasian continent but also serves as a buffer shielding the region from the direct influence of great power rivalry. The relative stability of Central Asia, which remains the only post-Soviet region free from armed conflict despite its proximity to the politically volatile Middle East, can be largely attributed to Kazakhstan's pragmatic and level-headed policies.

However, as the geopolitical landscape evolves, new challenges arise. The gradual reduction of U.S. engagement in the region, along with challenges in defining a clear strategy toward Central Asian countries, diminishes Kazakhstan's ability to maneuver effectively. This situation is exacerbated by the perception of the region as a geopolitical periphery. While it is true that Russia regards Central Asia as part of its sphere of influence and China holds substantial interests through the Belt and Road Initiative, the countries in the region, particularly Kazakhstan, have their own agendas and aspirations. Kazakhstan's leadership has demonstrated a keen awareness of the

complexities and dynamics at play.

Its multivector policy has not only been about balancing great power influences but also about asserting its own strategic interests and priorities. For instance, Kazakhstan has actively sought to diversify its economic partnerships and enhance regional cooperation.

Moreover, Kazakhstan's proactive diplomacy has extended beyond the region. It has played a significant role in global forums, advocating for nuclear non-proliferation, sustainable development, and intercultural dialogue. These efforts underscore Kazakhstan's commitment to a rules-based international order and its desire to contribute constructively to global governance.

Nevertheless, the shifting geopolitical dynamics necessitate a reevaluation of strategies. As U.S. involvement lessens and its strategic focus shifts, Kazakhstan must navigate the influence of Russia and China with greater caution. This requires a nuanced understanding of the regional power dynamics and an ability to adapt to changing circumstances while maintaining its strategic autonomy.

Kazakhstan's role as a facilitator of regional stability and development is crucial, particularly in mitigating the assertive tendencies of neighboring great powers.

With its unique geopolitical position as a landlocked nation bordered

by Russia and China, Kazakhstan has an inherent strategic relationship with both, which it cannot deny. It is remarkable that this landlocked country has transformed itself into the linchpin of Eurasia, becoming an indispensable part of supply chains on the continent. However, limitations remain. While the country benefits from the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor), which traverses from China to Europe, the majority of its own oil exports transit through Russia, making them potentially vulnerable to disruption.

By maintaining strategic partnerships with both Russia and China, Kazakhstan can effectively counterbalance their influences, not only within its own borders but across Central Asia. This balancing act allows Kazakhstan to manage its relationships in a way that prevents either neighbor from gaining disproportionate influence, which could affect regional stability and Kazakhstan's sovereignty. The nature of Kazakhstan's 'multivector' policy is often misrepresented; its balancing act is not opportunistic but inherently pragmatic.

From an outsider's perspective, it might seem that Russian influence in the region is waning. However, this perception is more accurately a result of Kazakhstan creating strategic space as Russia focuses its attention on Ukraine. In asymmetric relationships, the strategy is not to distance oneself at the first opportunity but to hedge long-term interests by navigating the temporary challenges faced by the stronger partner. Examples of this strategy include benefiting from the relocation of international firms from Russia to Kazakhstan, focusing on the development of the Middle Corridor, and proposing to mediate peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan to foster the opening of the Zangezur Corridor.

There is no 'pivot to the West' for Kazakhstan because there cannot be one. While the 'multivector' policy is often dubbed as 'equidistance,' it is perhaps more appropriately presented as 'equal closeness,' as there is no distance when it is most needed. This reduction in engagement can inadvertently diminish Kazakhstan's ability to maintain a balanced multivector foreign policy.

The irony of this dynamic is clear: the more involved Western powers are in Central Asia, the greater the degree of freedom Kazakhstan has to pursue a balanced and autonomous policy. Conversely, the less engagement from the West, the more Kazakhstan may find itself needing to choose sides, which could lead to increased dependence on either Russia or China.

Greater Western involvement in Kazakhstan offers significant benefits for both parties. Primarily, it introduces asymmetry in regional power dynamics, allowing Kazakhstan to diversify its alliances and reduce dependency on neighboring giants like Russia and China. This diversification enhances Kazakhstan's leverage in regional and international affairs, contributing to its



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autonomy and stability.

Unlike the situation in Ukraine, where intensified Western involvement has sometimes led to heightened tensions and antagonization with Russia, Kazakhstan's geopolitical and diplomatic strategy has traditionally been stabilizing. The country has consistently aimed at fostering stability and cooperation in regional affairs, making it a key player in maintaining regional equilibrium. Kazakhstan's careful navigation through its multivector policy has enabled it to mitigate the risks of great power rivalry, ensuring a more stable and cooperative environment in Central Asia.

Kazakhstan's potential to act as a counterbalance in Central Asia hinges significantly on continued and meaningful Western support. Without this, there's a real risk that the region could become more heavily influenced by Sino-Russian interests, limiting Kazakhstan's options and possibly skewing regional dynamics toward a less balanced state. This shift could undermine Kazakhstan's strategic autonomy and stability, leading to a more polarized and less cooperative regional environment.

The Western approach, therefore, should not merely be reactive but strategically proactive. Providing Kazakhstan and its Central Asian neighbors with the necessary support and engagement can uphold a multipolar regional order. This would benefit Kazakhstan's strategic objectives and align with Western interests in promoting stability and preventing the dominance of any single power in this crucially important area. A proactive Western strategy would involve not only diplomatic and economic engagement but also support for regional initiatives that enhance cooperation and stability.

By fostering stronger ties with Kazakhstan, the West can help ensure that Central Asia remains a region characterized by balanced relationships and cooperative dynamics. This strategic engagement is essential for maintaining a stable and multipolar regional order, where no single power can dominate the geopolitical landscape. For Kazakhstan, this means greater diplomatic freedom, enhanced stability, and the ability to pursue its independent policy goals effectively. For the West, it means securing its interests in a

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strategically vital region and promoting a more stable and balanced international system.

The critical nuance in understanding Kazakhstan's foreign policy is that, unlike Ukraine, Kazakhstan does not aspire to become part of the Western bloc. Consequently, Western efforts to push Kazakhstan into closer alignment can inadvertently mirror the tactics used by Russia and China, who seek to influence their neighbors for geopolitical reasons. This resemblance can be counterproductive, as it undermines Kazakhstan's agency and its own strategic imperatives.

A more productive perspective is to recognize that the long-term interests of the West and Kazakhstan may naturally align, particularly in terms of regional development and domestic policy. Kazakhstan's strategy of leveraging its relationships with both China and Russia, not to align more closely with one or the other but to maintain a balance of power, serves Western interests in ensuring that no single power dominates Central Asia.

By fostering a strategic equilibrium in the region, Kazakhstan acts as a stabilizer, indirectly supporting Western objectives by moderating the influence of both China and Russia. This approach also allows Kazakhstan to maximize its own benefits from these relationships, ensuring its sovereignty and enabling its continued pursuit of a multivector foreign policy.

In this context, U.S. policy towards Kazakhstan should prioritize supporting its autonomy and sovereignty without pressuring it to conform strictly to Western norms. Currently, the United States is the only major partner that has not developed a comprehensive strategy for Kazakhstan or the Central Asian region as a whole. This assessment is neither unique nor new; a 2022 report by the Kennan Institute on 30 years of U.S.-Kazakhstan relations concluded that the peak of strategic engagement occurred in the late 1990s and has been declining since then. Despite two years passing since the report, no significant changes have been implemented,

even as more American think tanks establish dedicated divisions for the region and highlight its strategic importance. The C5+1 format in 2023, which included participation from President Joe Biden, was a promising initiative, but it was not followed by substantive action. The West needs to become a reliable partner that respects Kazakhstan's unique position and aspirations, facilitating cooperation that acknowledges and supports its role as a regional stabilizer and a bridge between various powers. Time is of the essence, as Chinese interests continue to expand and Russia is likely to refocus on the region in the coming years. It is imperative for the West to not only formulate but also implement a comprehensive strategy for the future.

Kazakhstan's approach does not require long-term commitments that risk antagonization but rather a strategic flexibility—backed by sufficient international support, particularly from the West. By providing Kazakhstan with backing, Western nations can help ensure it has the maneuvering capability to maintain its balancing role. This support would not necessarily entail a deep alignment with Western policies but rather a partnership that respects Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy approach and its goal to remain a key regional player without becoming overly dependent on any single external power.

Investing in Kazakhstan's stability and autonomy can be exceptionally cost-effective for the West. Supporting Kazakhstan in this role not only helps to maintain regional balance but also serves broader Western interests in limiting the expansion of Russian and Chinese influence in strategically important regions. Such an approach aligns with Western goals of promoting stability and developing positive-sum relationships in global geopolitics, making Kazakhstan one of the most strategic partners for the West in this vast and pivotal region.

By respecting Kazakhstan's unique geopolitical context and fostering a relationship based on mutual interests and respect for sovereignty, the West can enhance Kazakhstan's role as a regional stabilizer. This, in turn, will contribute to a more balanced and stable Central Asia, which aligns with the broader strategic goals of the West in promoting global stability and cooperative international relations.

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