



Kazakhstan

Overview

Kazakhstan, a U.S. partner in areas such as counterterrorism, regional security, and nuclear nonproliferation, is a strategically situated country with significant hydrocarbon and mineral resources. It shares borders with Russia to the north and China to the east (see **Figure 1**). Although sparsely populated, Kazakhstan is the world's ninth-largest country by land area. Previously a republic of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan became independent in 1991. Since then, the authoritarian government has introduced market reforms, developed the energy sector, and moved to diversify its economy. Kazakhstan pursues a “multi-vector” foreign policy, seeking to balance relations with major powers while actively participating in international organizations. Following unprecedented unrest in January 2022, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has moved to consolidate power while his country confronts difficult geopolitical and economic dynamics in the wake of Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Some Members of Congress express interest in expanding U.S. engagement with Kazakhstan, supporting its political reform process, and encouraging democratization. Kazakhstan has refused to endorse Russia's invasion and provided humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, leading some analysts to suggest that Kazakhstan is moving away from Russia's influence, which may present new opportunities for U.S. engagement. Other Members express concern about Kazakhstan's human rights record and have called for a review of U.S. security assistance in the wake of the January 2022 unrest.

Political Background

Reforms introduced by Tokayev are aimed at restructuring Kazakhstan's political system and annulling the privileged position of former President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who held office for nearly three decades until his 2019 resignation. While authorities tout ongoing reforms as moving the country in a more democratic direction, skeptics question the degree to which Kazakhstan will implement genuine democratization.

Tokayev, seen as Nazarbayev's hand-picked successor, won a snap presidential election in 2019. Nazarbayev initially maintained significant powers, leading some analysts to term Kazakhstan's government a “duopoly.” That changed in January 2022, when initially peaceful demonstrations over economic inequality and corruption became the largest and most violent protests in Kazakhstan's history, leaving over 200 dead. Tokayev referred to the events as an “attempted coup.” Many analysts contend that figures associated with Nazarbayev took advantage of genuine popular protests to pursue an intra-elite power struggle. As Tokayev moved to control the situation, he appealed for

assistance from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Russia-led security alliance to which Kazakhstan belongs. In the first deployment in the organization's history, a CSTO mission of roughly 2,500 mostly Russian troops spent about two weeks in Kazakhstan.

In a move some analysts see as part of Tokayev's efforts to reduce Nazarbayev's influence, Kazakhstan held a constitutional referendum on June 5, 2022. Voters approved changes curtailing some presidential powers and removing mentions of Nazarbayev from the constitution. Tokayev said the constitutional changes would shift Kazakhstan from a “super-presidential form of government to a presidential republic with a strong parliament.” Following additional legislation extending the presidential term from five years to seven and imposing a one-term limit, a snap presidential election was held in November, two years ahead of schedule, with Tokayev winning 81% of the vote. Observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) deemed the electoral contest “lacking competitiveness.”

Figure 1. Map of Kazakhstan



Source: CRS

Human Rights and Civil Society. According to the U.S. State Department, serious human rights issues in Kazakhstan include restrictions on freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association; the absence of an independent judiciary; and arbitrary detention, torture, and unlawful or arbitrary killings by police. The nongovernmental organization Human Rights Watch assesses that Kazakhstan's government has been engaging in a “multi-year crackdown on government critics.” Reporters Without Borders ranks Kazakhstan 122nd out of 180 countries in its 2022 World Press Freedom Index.

Economic inequality and a perceived lack of government accountability have fueled grassroots discontent in recent years. In 2011, protests by oil workers in the western town of Zhanaozen turned violent, leaving at least 15 demonstrators dead and dozens injured after police opened

fire. In 2016, large-scale protests broke out against proposed changes to the country's land code, which critics feared would lead to a Chinese takeover of Kazakhstan's agricultural land. Since 2018, there have been multiple demonstrations by women protesting a perceived lack of support from the state for single mothers and families with many children. Nazarbayev's 2019 resignation and the subsequent snap presidential election catalyzed further protests and calls for transition to a parliamentary system.

Kazakhstan at a Glance

Land area: 2,699,700 sq. km.; 1.6 times the size of Alaska

Population: 19.1 million (2022 est.)

Ethnicities: 70% Kazakh, 18% Russian, 3% Uzbek, 1.5% Uyghur, 1.3% Ukrainian, 6.9% Other (2022)

Languages: Kazakh (official), Russian (official)

GDP/GNI per capita (2021): \$197.11 billion/\$8,880

Data from World Bank and Kazakhstan's Bureau of National Statistics

Economy

Kazakhstan is Central Asia's most economically developed country. Major exports include oil, copper, ferroalloys, uranium, and wheat. Dependence on oil exports renders Kazakhstan vulnerable to external shocks, and Kazakhstan's economy is closely tied to that of its primary trading partner, Russia. The COVID-19 pandemic and the related fall in oil prices caused significant economic pressure. The World Bank estimates that Kazakhstan's economy contracted by 2.5% in 2020 as a result of the pandemic; the country last experienced negative economic growth in the late 1990s. Following a recovery of 4% GDP growth in 2021, the World Bank assesses that spillover effects from Russia's war against Ukraine led GDP growth to slow to 3% in 2022.

Energy. Kazakhstan is a major energy exporter, producing significant volumes of crude oil, natural gas, and coal. The country is estimated to have the world's 12th-largest oil reserves and 16th-largest natural gas reserves. Kazakhstan's oil and gas resources attract significant investment from U.S., European, Russian, and Chinese partners. According to the World Bank, hydrocarbon output accounted for 21% of GDP and about 70% of exports in 2020.

Kazakhstan holds 12% of the world's uranium and has led world uranium production since 2009. In 2022, a joint venture between state-owned nuclear energy company Kazatomprom and China General Nuclear Power Corporation began producing nuclear fuel in Kazakhstan.

Diversification. Kazakhstan's government seeks to diversify its economy away from hydrocarbons through ongoing structural and institutional reforms. Kazakhstan is implementing transport and logistics development and modernization projects with neighboring countries, mainly aligned with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The government seeks to turn Kazakhstan into a regional financial hub with the creation of the Astana International Finance Center and the Astana International Exchange. The U.S. Department of Commerce has identified agriculture as

an area of opportunity for U.S. firms as Kazakhstan seeks to reduce its dependence on extractive industries.

Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations

Multi-Vector Foreign Policy. Although Kazakhstan seeks to avoid alignment with any one power, the United States and Kazakhstan have a strong and wide-ranging relationship, even as Kazakhstan maintains close economic, political, and military ties with Russia. Some analysts believe that Kazakhstan is distancing itself from Russia in light of the war in Ukraine. Kazakhstan has avoided endorsing Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine, and Kazakhstani officials have expressed support for Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Kazakhstan is developing closer economic ties with China, which is now Kazakhstan's primary export destination. Kazakhstan is seen as a key country in the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt—one of the main corridors of China's BRI—and has received significant financing from Chinese entities to construct transport and energy infrastructure. Many analysts assess that Kazakhstan's economic ties with China make the country's government wary of antagonizing its powerful eastern neighbor. In some segments of Kazakhstani society, there is resentment of Chinese migrant laborers as well as China's repression of Muslims—including ethnic Kazakhs—in Xinjiang.

Counterterrorism and Security. An estimated 150-600 Kazakh citizens reportedly fought for the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq, but because many of them traveled to IS-controlled territories with their families, the total number of IS-associated Kazakhs is likely closer to 1,000. Between 2019 and 2021, Kazakhstan repatriated several hundred of its citizens from Syria, primarily women and children, with logistical support from the United States. Kazakhstan participates in the U.S.-led C5+1 regional initiative, which has a counterterrorism component.

Nonproliferation. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Kazakhstan was left with 1,410 nuclear warheads on its territory, but by 1995 it had transferred them all to Russia. Kazakhstan also dismantled Soviet nuclear testing infrastructure. The United States provided \$240 million in assistance to Kazakhstan's denuclearization efforts through the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction program, and the two countries continue to cooperate on nuclear security. Kazakhstan hosts a low-enriched uranium bank owned by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

U.S. Foreign Assistance. U.S. assistance to Kazakhstan aims to encourage the country's government to adopt broader political reforms and liberalization, and to shift away from Russia's sphere of influence. Another focus of U.S. assistance to Kazakhstan is security cooperation, particularly strengthening military partnerships, fighting transnational crime, and combatting weapons of mass destruction. The State Department requested \$18.7 million in appropriations for aid to Kazakhstan for FY2023, as compared to \$10.7 million requested for FY2022 and \$11.4 million allocated in FY2021.

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