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Kazakhstan: Background and Issues for Congress

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Kazakhstan: Background and Issues for Congress

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, the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China) to the east, and the Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan to the south.

Although sparsely populated, Kazakhstan is the world's ninth-largest country by land area. It is the most economically developed country in Central Asia, with rich reserves of hydrocarbons and a range of minerals and significant potential to develop the agricultural sector.

Previously a constituent 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 the country's 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.

Kazakhstan retains close military, political, economic, and cultural ties to Russia, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine has ongoing repercussions for the country. Kazakhstan has avoided endorsing Russia's invasion and provided humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, and some observers note that the Kazakhstan government has reacted uneasily to Russian statements, including by President Vladimir Putin, questioning Kazakhstan's sovereignty and territorial integrity. This position has led some analysts to suggest that Kazakhstan is moving away from Russia's influence, although the two countries continue to actively engage with each other. Some observers posit that China is consolidating its influence in Kazakhstan in response. Kazakhstan's interest in diversifying its diplomatic and economic relations may present new opportunities for U.S. engagement.

Potential areas to expand U.S. relations with Kazakhstan and congressional action include the following:

- **Trade.** Trade between the United States and Kazakhstan is limited, and is governed by Section 402 of the Trade Act of 1974 (P.L. 93-618), the so-called Jackson-Vanik amendment, which denies permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) to certain former nonmarket economies. Exempting a given country from Jackson-Vanik requires Congress to pass relevant legislation. The Biden Administration supports repealing Jackson-Vanik applicability for Kazakhstan. In the 118th Congress, H.R. 3611 and S. 2748 would authorize the President to extend PNTR to Kazakhstan.
- **Security cooperation.** Some analysts and U.S. officials see new opportunities for expanding security cooperation between the United States and Kazakhstan in light of the war in Ukraine. Nonproliferation has historically been and continues to be a significant area of U.S.-Kazakhstan cooperation.
- **Resources.** Although Kazakhstan has significant reserves of hydrocarbons, the country faces periodic domestic energy crises resulting from high demand coupled with infrastructural deficiencies. Kazakhstan is rich in critical minerals, and experts assess that it has significant renewable energy potential.
- **Regional connectivity.** Promoting regional connectivity has long been a U.S. policy priority in Central Asia, in part to strengthen regional countries' economic and political sovereignty. Some analysts suggest that regional connectivity in Central Asia has taken on added significance in light of the war in Ukraine as Central Asian governments seek to diversify their economic and security relationships away from Russia.

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Overview

Endowed with hydrocarbon and mineral resources, Kazakhstan is the most economically developed country in Central Asia.¹ Kazakhstan shares lengthy borders with Russia to the north and the People’s Republic of China (PRC or China) to the east, and also borders the Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan (see **Figure 1**); it is the world’s ninth largest country by land area (about four times the size of Texas). The ethnically diverse population of approximately 20 million is predominantly Kazakh (71%), with minority groups including Russians (15%), Uzbeks (3.3%), Ukrainians (1.9%), and Uyghurs (1.5%), among others.² About 60% of the population is Muslim, mostly Sunni, and approximately 15% is Christian, primarily Russian Orthodox.³ Since the country’s independence in 1991, Kazakhstan’s 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 its relations with major powers while actively participating in international organizations.⁴

Figure 1. Map of Kazakhstan



Source: Graphic created by CRS.

Notes: Abbreviations: GEO—Georgia; AZE—Azerbaijan; MNG—Mongolia. Internal administrative boundaries are not authoritative.

¹ Kazakhstan has the highest GDP and the highest GDP per capita in the region. The country ranks 67th in the UN’s 2022 Human Development Index, ahead of Turkmenistan (94th), Uzbekistan (106th), Kyrgyzstan (117th), and Tajikistan (126th). Rankings available at <https://hdr.undp.org/>.

² Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *The Number of Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan by Selected Ethnic Groups at the Beginning of 2024*, April 22, 2024, at <https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/social-statistics/demography/publications/157662/>.

³ U.S. Department of State, *2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Kazakhstan*, June 26, 2024.

⁴ “Mukhtar Tileuberdi: ‘Despite the Pandemic, the Foundations of Kazakhstan’s Foreign Policy Remain Unchanged,’” *The Astana Times*, January 7, 2021.

Domestic Political Background

The Russian empire asserted control over the territory that now includes Kazakhstan over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, and these lands became part of the Soviet Union after a period of armed struggle following the 1917 Russian Revolution. The 1991 Soviet collapse gave rise to Kazakhstan's independence. Following independence, Kazakhstan's political system was dominated by Nursultan Nazarbayev, a former high-level Soviet official who became the country's first president in 1991 and remained in that office until 2019. While Nazarbayev's authoritarian government faced international criticism for human rights violations and suppression of political dissent, he enjoyed strong domestic popularity for much of his presidency due to his largely successful efforts to promote stability and economic development.⁵ Nazarbayev resigned from the presidency in March 2019, but he initially maintained several powerful positions and constitutionally protected status.⁶

Nazarbayev's hand-picked successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, an experienced politician and diplomat who had previously served as a high-level United Nations (UN) official, won a snap presidential election in June 2019 with 71% of the vote. Independent observers questioned the integrity of this result.⁷ The election and Tokayev's victory spurred large-scale protests, leading to hundreds of arrests in Kazakhstan's capital and in Almaty, the country's largest city and main commercial center.⁸ At the time of his election, Tokayev was widely seen to be a Nazarbayev loyalist, and his stated motivation for running was to maintain Nazarbayev's "strategic course" and to ensure "the continuity of our Leader's policies."⁹ Tokayev coupled his emphasis on continuity with promises of systemic reforms aimed at modernizing Kazakhstan's political system and improving government openness and accountability. Some analysts questioned the extent to which President Tokayev could act independently of his predecessor, who maintained control of the security apparatus in addition to various other powers until January 2022.¹⁰

Economic inequality and a perceived lack of government accountability have fueled grassroots discontent in Kazakhstan in the past decade, and civil society activism and public demonstrations received new impetus with the presidential transition.¹¹ On January 2, 2022, peaceful demonstrations broke out in Kazakhstan's western oil-producing region over an increase in fuel prices that resulted from a cut in government subsidies. The protests quickly spread throughout the country and within days became the largest and most violent unrest in Kazakhstan's history,

⁵ Annette Bohr et al., *Kazakhstan: Tested By Transition*, Chatham House, November 2019, p. 16.

⁶ Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan of July 20, 2000, No. 83-II, "On the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan—The Leader of the Nation," at http://www.akorda.kz/ru/official_documents/constitutional_laws/0-pervom-prezidente-respubliki-kazahstan-lidere-nacii.

⁷ OSCE ODIHR, *Republic of Kazakhstan Early Presidential Election, 9 June 2019: ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report*, October 4, 2019; Bohr et al., *Kazakhstan*, p. 40; Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2020: Kazakhstan*.

⁸ Joanna Lillis, "Nazarbayev Ally Wins Big in Kazakhstan Election After Hundreds Arrested," *The Guardian*, June 10, 2019; "Kazakhstan Election Condemned by International Observers," *BBC*, June 10, 2019.

⁹ "Nazarbaev reshil vydvinit' Tokaeva v prezidenty Kazakhstana" [Nazarbayev has decided to nominate Tokayev for the presidency of Kazakhstan], *BBC News Russian*, April 23, 2019.

¹⁰ See, for example, Paolo Sorbello, "The Illusions of Post-Nazarbayev Kazakhstan," *The Diplomat*, February 1, 2021; Nurseit Niyazbekov, "Democracy, the Tokayev Way," *The Diplomat*, March 3, 2020; Bohr et al., *Kazakhstan*, pp. v, 10-15, 19-22.

¹¹ See, for example, Bradley Jardine et al., *Mapping Patterns of Dissent in Eurasia: Introducing the Central Asia Protest Tracker*, Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, May 11, 2022 and Gaziz Abishev, Bakhytzhon Kurmanov, and Zhaxylyk Sabitov, "Authoritarian Succession, Rules, and Conflicts: Tokayev's Gambit and Kazakhstan's Bloody January of 2022 (Qandy Qantar)," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, July 2024.

with violence most pronounced in Almaty.¹² At least 238 people reportedly died as a result of what has become known as “Bloody January,” and over 1,300 have been criminally convicted in connection with these events, including about a dozen former law enforcement officials who had been accused of torturing people detained during the unrest.¹³ Most court proceedings related to the unrest have been closed to the public, however, and the government of Kazakhstan has resisted calls for an independent investigation. Some scholars assess that in addition to peaceful protestors with genuine economic and political demands and opportunistic looters, the events involved “organized provocateurs,” who attacked government facilities, crucial infrastructure, and law enforcement.¹⁴ President Tokayev and some independent outside observers have referred to the events as an “attempted coup.”¹⁵

Many analysts contend that figures associated with Nazarbayev and his family took advantage of genuine popular protests for the purposes of an intra-elite power struggle, with the aim of forcing Tokayev to resign. On January 5, after violence broke out overnight in Almaty, Tokayev announced that he was assuming chairmanship of Kazakhstan’s Security Council, a body previously headed by Nazarbayev. He also fired the head of the National Security Committee, a Nazarbayev loyalist, and appealed for assistance from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Russia-led security alliance to which Kazakhstan belongs.¹⁶ A CSTO mission of about 2,000 (primarily Russian) troops deployed the next day and remained in Kazakhstan until the following week.¹⁷ CSTO forces were not directly involved in responding to the unrest; they were stationed to protect key infrastructure such as government buildings, airports, power stations, and TV broadcasters. Analysts assess that CSTO intervention was intended primarily as a signal to Kazakhstan’s elite that Tokayev had Russia’s support, and that the deployment was a means of “symbolic support to a friendly regime rather than [...] actually provid[ing] military assistance.”¹⁸

In the aftermath of this unrest, President Tokayev consolidated his power, removing Nazarbayev associates and family members from positions of authority and recouping over \$470 million in allegedly ill-gotten gains.¹⁹ In a move some analysts see as a continuation of Tokayev’s efforts to reduce Nazarbayev’s political influence, his government held a constitutional referendum in June 2022, in which voters approved a range of changes that curtail some presidential powers. The constitutional changes also removed mentions of Nazarbayev from the constitution and stripped him and his close relatives of their constitutionally mandated immunity from prosecution.²⁰

¹² Hanna Duggal and Alia Chughtai, “Maps and Charts to Understand Kazakhstan’s Protests,” *Al Jazeera*, January 7, 2022.

¹³ Almaz Kumenov, “Kazakhstan: More Convictions in connection with Bloody January events,” *Eurasianet*, June 12, 2024; “Kazakhstan: Ex-police Officers Convicted for Bloody January Torture,” *Eurasianet*, March 19, 2024.

¹⁴ Azamat Junisbai, “The Limits of Authoritarian Learning: Deconstructing Kazakhstan’s 2022 Coup Attempt,” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 775, May 2022, p. 3.

¹⁵ “Kazakhstan Unrest Was Coup Attempt, Says President,” *BBC News*, January 10, 2022; Junisbai, “The Limits of Authoritarian Learning,” p. 2; Dihan Qamzabekuly, “Qasym-Jomart Toqayev: Biz ozyq oily ult retinde tek qana alǵa qarayymyz kerek” [Qasym-Jomart Toqayev: As a forward-thinking nation, we should look only ahead], *Egemen Qazaqstan*, January 3, 2024.

¹⁶ Arkady Dubnov, “Kazakhstan: A Coup, a Counter-Coup and a Russian Victory,” *Al Jazeera*, January 16, 2022.

¹⁷ The other CSTO members—Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—deployed smaller numbers of personnel, but Russian troops represented the bulk of the deployment.

¹⁸ Alexander Libman and Igor Davidzon, “Military Intervention as a Spectacle? Authoritarian Regionalism and Protests in Kazakhstan,” *International Affairs* 99, no. 3 (May 2023): 1293-1312.

¹⁹ Almaz Kumenov, “Kazakhstan: Key Nazarbayev Cronies Undergo Apparent Purge,” *Eurasianet*, January 17, 2022; Joanna Lillis, “Kazakhstan Claws Millions Back from Nazarbayev Associates,” *Eurasianet*, July 18, 2022.

²⁰ Almaz Kumenov, “Kazakhstan: Nazarbayev to Lose His Place in Constitution,” *Eurasianet*, May 5, 2022; Colleen Wood, “What’s in Kazakhstan’s Constitutional Referendum?” *The Diplomat*, May 9, 2022.

Tokayev said the constitutional changes would shift Kazakhstan from a “super-presidential form of government to a presidential republic with a strong parliament.”²¹ After parliament passed legislation in September 2022 that extends the presidential term from five to seven years and imposes a one-term limit, Tokayev announced a snap presidential election for November, two years ahead of schedule; he won 81% of the vote.²² Snap parliamentary elections held within a new legislative framework approved in the constitutional referendum took place in March 2023. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) noted “elements of competitiveness” in the elections, but also flagged “significant procedural irregularities.”²³ While self-nominated candidates were allowed to run for the first time since 2004, the ruling Amanat party secured a parliamentary majority, winning 63 of 98 seats.

Although President Tokayev’s vision for a “New Kazakhstan” includes the development of a “multipolar party system” and “fair and free political competition,” some analysts express skepticism as to the degree of political pluralism Kazakhstan’s government will allow, and see Tokayev’s reform program as one of “authoritarian modernization.”²⁴ One scholar argues that Kazakhstan’s authorities are pursuing “a modicum of change, but only the type of change they can control.”²⁵ The government of Kazakhstan continues to promote ongoing reforms, arguing that legislative changes have strengthened the parliament, increased government accountability, improved the electoral process, and bolstered human rights protections.²⁶ The United States has expressed “strong support for the full implementation of President Tokayev’s reform agenda.”²⁷

Human Rights

According to the State Department, human rights issues in Kazakhstan include serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; serious and unreasonable restrictions on political participation; and serious government corruption.²⁸ The State Department notes that, despite constitutional guarantees, the right to free exercise of religion is in practice “limited to registered religious groups, especially those considered ‘traditional’ to Kazakh society” and that some

²¹ “Kazakhs Vote for Constitutional Changes Ending Nazarbaev’s Grip on Country,” *RFE/RL*, June 6, 2022.

²² Catherine Putz, “Kazakh Leader Calls for Snap Presidential Election,” *The Diplomat*, September 1, 2022; “Kazakh President Tokayev Wins Re-election with 81.3% of Vote,” Reuters, November 21, 2022.

²³ OSCE ODIHR, *Election Observation Mission, Republic of Kazakhstan—Early Parliamentary Elections, 19 March 2023: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*, March 20, 2023.

²⁴ Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “State-of-the-Nation Address by President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev,” March 16, 2022; Catherine Putz, “Is There Room in ‘New Kazakhstan’ for New Political Parties?” *The Diplomat*, June 14, 2022; Benjamin Godwin, “What to Expect from Tokayev’s Second Term,” *The Diplomat*, November 13, 2022.

²⁵ Chris Rickleton and Yelnura Alimova, “Kazakh Authorities Seek ‘Change They Can Control’ in Parliament Election,” *RFE/RL*, March 18, 2023.

²⁶ See, for example, Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Kazakhstan realizuet konkretnye mery po zashchite prav cheloveka” [Kazakhstan is implementing concrete steps for the protection of human rights], January 12, 2024; Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Vystuplenie Prezidenta Kasym-Zhomarta Tokaeva na torzhestvennoi tseremonii po sluchaiu nagrazhdeniia rabotnikov SMI” [Address by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at an awards ceremony for media workers], June 27, 2024.

²⁷ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, “United States—Kazakhstan High Level Dialogue on Human Rights and Democratic Reforms,” May 20, 2024.

²⁸ U.S. Department of State, *2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Kazakhstan*, April 22, 2024.

individuals face fines, arrest, or imprisonment due to their religious beliefs or affiliation.²⁹ In its 2023 *Country Report on Human Rights Practices*, the State Department noted that the government of Kazakhstan “took some credible steps to identify and punish officials who may have committed human rights abuses.”³⁰ At the third annual U.S.-Kazakhstan High Level Dialogue on Human Rights and Democratic Reforms, held in May 2024, the State Department “encouraged advancement of Kazakhstan’s reform efforts with the full participation of, and in consultation with, civil society partners for transparency and accountability,” adding, “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are integral to a prosperous, vibrant ‘New Kazakhstan,’ where independent media, civil society groups, and political parties can operate freely, without undue restrictions.”³¹

Independent media watchdogs such as Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists criticize the government of Kazakhstan for its policies with respect to freedom of the press.³² In January 2023, Kazakhstan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied accreditation to 36 journalists from the Kazakh Service of U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL); RFE/RL reached an agreement with the government of Kazakhstan on accrediting its journalists in April 2024.³³ In 2023, Kazakhstan enacted a law that imposes fines for disseminating false or misleading information online, and includes provisions specifically aimed at protecting the public from online financial fraud.³⁴ Because the law does not specify how the veracity of online content should be determined, some nongovernmental organizations argue that it will lead to increased self-censorship.³⁵ In June 2024, President Tokayev signed a new law on media regulation. The stated aims of the law include enhancing legal protections for journalists, but critics argue it imposes new restrictions that undermine media freedom.³⁶ The law also requires that 60% of weekly broadcasting on television and radio be in the Kazakh language by 2027 (currently 50% of broadcasts are in Russian) and cuts the rebroadcasting of foreign programs from 20% to 10%.³⁷

Although Kazakhstan’s constitution guarantees freedom of assembly, restrictive legislation on public demonstrations makes it difficult to exercise in practice. President Tokayev signed a new law on the organization and conduct of demonstrations in May 2020, and the government of Kazakhstan touts the legislation as a positive reform that provides avenues for organizations to legally demonstrate.³⁸ Domestic and international human rights organizations have criticized the law for failing to meet international human rights standards, however. According to Human

²⁹ U.S. Department of State, *2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Kazakhstan*, June 26, 2024.

“Traditional” religious groups are not legally defined, but the term generally encompasses Hanafi Sunni Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, Greek and Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Judaism.

³⁰ U.S. Department of State, *2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Kazakhstan*, April 22, 2024.

³¹ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, “United States—Kazakhstan High Level Dialogue on Human Rights and Democratic Reforms,” May 20, 2024.

³² See, for example, Reporters Without Borders, “Kazakhstan,” at <https://rsf.org/en/country/kazakhstan>; Committee to Protect Journalists, “Kazakhstan,” available at <https://cpj.org/europe/kazakhstan/>.

³³ “RFE/RL, Kazakh Foreign Ministry Reach Agreement on Accreditation,” *RFE/RL*, April 23, 2024.

³⁴ Almaz Kumenov, “Kazakhstan Adopts Law to Regulate Untamed Social Media Scene,” *Eurasianet*, July 12, 2023.

³⁵ “Kazakhstan Urged to Rescind Draconian New ‘Fake News’ Law,” Reporters Without Borders, September 8, 2023.

³⁶ Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Glavoi gosudarstva podpisan Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan ‘O mass-media’” [The head of state has signed the law of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On mass media”], June 19, 2024; Hugh Williamson, “New Mass Media Law Threatens Freedom of Speech, Information in Kazakhstan,” Human Rights Watch, June 22, 2024.

³⁷ “Kazakh President Signs into Law Controversial Bill on Media,” *RFE/RL*, June 20, 2024.

³⁸ Assel Satubaldina, “Freedom of Expression Is the Constitutional Right of Every Citizen, Says Tokayev,” *Astana Times*, February 17, 2021; Almaz Kumenov, “Kazakhstan: President Signs off on Contentious Rally Law,” *Eurasianet*, May 26, 2020.

Rights Watch, onerous restrictions and bureaucratic requirements mean that the ability to protest remains “more a privilege than a right.”³⁹

In April 2024, the government of Kazakhstan re-criminalized domestic violence (which had been downgraded to a civil offense in 2017), in what the State Department termed “a very important step in protecting survivors.”⁴⁰ The move coincided with the high-profile trial of a former government minister who was convicted of beating his wife to death. The legal proceedings were livestreamed online and garnered significant attention from the public, including in Russia.⁴¹

Table I. Kazakhstan: Selected Democracy and Human Rights Indexes

Issue	Index	2020 Status/Rank	2023/2024 Status/Rank
Democracy	Freedom House, Freedom in the World	Not Free (Score: 23/100)	Not Free (Score: 23/100)
Press Freedom	Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index	157 th of 180 Countries	134 th of 180 Countries
Economic Freedom	Heritage Foundation, Index of Economic Freedom	Moderately Free (Score: 69.6/100)	Moderately Free (Score: 62/100)
Perceptions of Corruption	Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index	94 th of 180 Countries	93 rd of 180 Countries
Rule of Law	World Justice Project, Rule of Law Index	62 nd of 128 Countries and Jurisdictions	65 th of 142 Countries and Jurisdictions

Source: Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2020* and *Freedom in the World 2024*; Reporters Without Borders, *2020 World Press Freedom Index* and *2023 World Press Freedom Index*; The Heritage Foundation, *2020 Index of Economic Freedom* and *2024 Index of Economic Freedom*; Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2020* and *Corruption Perceptions Index 2023*; World Justice Project, *Rule of Law Index 2020* and *Rule of Law Index 2023*.

Economy

Kazakhstan is Central Asia’s most economically developed country, with an export-oriented economy highly dependent on hydrocarbons.⁴² Major exports by value include oil, copper, ferroalloys, uranium, and wheat. The COVID-19 pandemic and the related fall in oil prices caused significant economic pressure.⁴³ 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% gross domestic product (GDP) growth in 2021, the World Bank assesses that supply chain disruptions stemming from Russia’s war against Ukraine contributed to slower GDP growth of 3.2% in 2022. The World Bank

³⁹ Mihra Rittman, “Kazakhstan’s ‘Reformed’ Protest Law Hardly an Improvement: Serious Restrictions on Right to Free Assembly Remain,” Human Rights Watch, May 28, 2020.

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, “United States—Kazakhstan High Level Dialogue on Human Rights and Democratic Reforms,” May 20, 2024.

⁴¹ Joy Neumeyer, “The Kazakh Murder Trial That Captivated Russia,” *Foreign Policy*, May 14, 2024.

⁴² U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, “Kazakhstan—Market Overview,” September 1, 2022, at <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/kazakhstan-market-overview>.

⁴³ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *COVID-19 Crisis Response in Central Asia*, November 16, 2020, p. 18.

projects growth of 3.4% in 2024 and 4.7% in 2025, driven by increased oil production.⁴⁴ In 2023, Tokayev announced a “new paradigm for Kazakhstan’s economic development” focused on developing the manufacturing sector, economic diversification, bolstering domestic entrepreneurship, modernizing and expanding the mining and agricultural sectors, and realizing Kazakhstan’s full potential in transport and logistics, among other goals.⁴⁵

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 reserves of oil and 16th-largest reserves of natural gas, and is a member of OPEC+.⁴⁶ Kazakhstan’s oil and gas resources attract investment from U.S., European, Russian, and PRC firms. According to the International Monetary Fund, hydrocarbons accounted for 15% of GDP and over 53% of exports in 2023.⁴⁷ The country’s reliance on oil exports renders it vulnerable to external shocks.

Although it is an energy producer, Kazakhstan experiences periodic energy crises due to infrastructural deficiencies and increasing domestic demand.⁴⁸ In recent winters, households in parts of Kazakhstan have been left without heating due to power outages, sometimes for days.⁴⁹ Some experts project that rising domestic energy demand will lead Kazakhstan to import gas from Russia; Kazakhstan already serves as a transit route for Russian gas exports to Uzbekistan.⁵⁰

Kazakhstan’s government is considering construction of a nuclear power plant as a decarbonization measure and a potential solution for meeting domestic energy demand. Nuclear power is a contentious issue in light of the legacy of Soviet nuclear testing in Kazakhstan, which continues to have economic and health reverberations.⁵¹ President Tokayev has said that a referendum on the planned new nuclear power plant will be held in fall 2024, but no date has yet been set.⁵² Kazakhstan’s Ministry of Energy has reportedly short-listed four companies as potential providers of reactor technology: the China Nuclear Power Corporation, Russia’s

⁴⁴ World Bank, “The World Bank in Kazakhstan: Overview,” at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/kazakhstan/overview#3>.

⁴⁵ Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev’s State of the Nation Address ‘Economic Course of a Just Kazakhstan,’” September 1, 2023.

⁴⁶ BP, *Statistical Review of World Energy 2021*, July 2021, pp. 16, 34; U.S. Energy Information Administration, “What Is OPEC+ and How Is It Different from OPEC?,” May 9, 2023, at <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=56420>.

⁴⁷ International Monetary Fund, *Republic of Kazakhstan: Selected Issues*, at <https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/CR/2024/English/1KAZEA2024002.ashx>.

⁴⁸ Assel Tutumlu and Farkhod Aminjonov, “Central Asia’s Great Energy Paradox,” *The Diplomat*, December 1, 2023.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Almaz Kumenov, “Kazakhstan Again Struggling with Power Outages,” *Eurasianet*, February 14, 2023; “Top Official at Kazakh City’s Thermal Power Plant Found Dead amid Heating Crisis,” *RFE/RL*, December 6, 2022.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Marcin Poplawski and Filip Rudnik, “Russian Gas in Central Asia: A Plan to Deepen Dependence,” Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), October 31, 2023.

⁵¹ See, for example, Petr Trotsenko, “‘Peaceful Atom’ Sparks Fierce Debate in Kazakh Village Slated to Host Nuclear Power Plant,” *RFE/RL*, August 28, 2023 and Haley Nelson, “Kazakhstan’s New Nuclear Problem: Lake Balkhash,” Caspian Policy Center, February 22, 2024. Kazakhstan currently operates three research reactors and a Soviet-era nuclear power plant. On Soviet nuclear testing in Kazakhstan, see, for example, Togzhan Kassenova, *Atomic Steppe: How Kazakhstan Gave Up the Bomb* (Stanford University Press, 2022).

⁵² Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Vystuplenie Prezidenta Kasym-Zhomarta Tokaeva na torzhestvennoi tseremonii po sluchaiu nagrazhdeniia rabotnikov SMI” [Address by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at an awards ceremony for media workers], June 27, 2024.

Rosatom, France's EDF, and South Korea's Korea Hydro and Nuclear Power Company.⁵³ Some analysts speculate that Kazakhstan will choose to partner with Rosatom, prompting concerns about safety and potential geopolitical risks for Kazakhstan.⁵⁴

Kazakhstan holds 12% of the world's uranium reserves and has led world uranium production since 2009. According to the World Nuclear Association, the country accounted for 43% of world uranium production in 2022.⁵⁵ In 2015, Kazakhstan's state-owned nuclear energy company Kazatomprom and China General Nuclear Power Corporation agreed to a joint venture to build a fuel fabrication plant; the plant became operational in 2021.⁵⁶ Kazakhstan also hosts a low-enriched uranium (LEU) bank owned and operated by the International Atomic Energy Agency. The LEU bank is intended to decrease the global risk of nuclear weapons proliferation by guaranteeing countries that lack enrichment capabilities access to fuel for peaceful purposes in the event of supply disruptions on the commercial market. It is the only facility of its kind that is not controlled by any individual country.⁵⁷

Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy

Bilateral Relations with the United States

The United States was the first country to recognize Kazakhstan's independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since that time, the United States and Kazakhstan have developed a strong and wide-ranging bilateral relationship, even as Kazakhstan has sought to avoid alignment with any one power. At a February 2023 meeting with Secretary of State Antony Blinken, President Tokayev noted that the United States and Kazakhstan have developed "very good and reliable long-term partnerships in so many strategically important areas like security, energy, trade, and investment" and expressed Kazakhstan's appreciation for "the continuous and firm support of the United States for our independence, territorial integrity, and sovereignty."⁵⁸ The United States and Kazakhstan entered into an Enhanced Strategic Partnership in 2018. At the sixth annual Enhanced Strategic Partnership Dialogue, held in May 2024, the two sides discussed regional security, human rights, and deepening bilateral economic cooperation.⁵⁹

Security cooperation constitutes a significant aspect of the U.S.-Kazakhstan bilateral relationship, which was characterized by a U.S. military official in 2019 as "the most mature and forward-

⁵³ Assel Satubaldina, "Nuclear Power Plant in Kazakhstan: What's Next," *The Astana Times*, August 18, 2023.

⁵⁴ Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan to Hold Referendum on Building Nuclear Power Plant," *Eurasianet*, July 2, 2024.

⁵⁵ World Nuclear Association, "Uranium and Nuclear Power in Kazakhstan," March 14, 2024, at <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-g-n/kazakhstan>.

⁵⁶ Kazatomprom National Atomic Company, "Kazatomprom and Chinese Companies Sign an Agreement on Nuclear Cooperation," December 15, 2015; Mattia Baldoni and Kamen Kraev, "Kazatomprom-CGN Joint Venture to Supply Framatome Assemblies to China," *NucNet*, March 5, 2020; Kazatomprom, "About Us: History," at https://www.kazatomprom.kz/en/page/istoriya_kompanii.

⁵⁷ IAEA, "IAEA Low Enriched Uranium (LEU) Bank," at <https://www.iaea.org/topics/iaea-low-enriched-uranium-bank>; Nuclear Threat Initiative, "IAEA Low Enriched Uranium Bank Launches in Kazakhstan, Significant Milestone for NTI-Backed Nuclear Security Initiative," August 28, 2017.

⁵⁸ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev Before Their Meeting," February 28, 2023.

⁵⁹ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, "Joint Statement on the United States-Kazakhstan Enhanced Strategic Partnership Dialogue," June 5, 2024.

thinking in Central Asia.”⁶⁰ Since 1993, Kazakhstan has partnered with Arizona through the National Guard’s State Partnership Program. The State Department describes cooperation on security and nuclear non-proliferation as a “cornerstone” of the U.S.-Kazakhstan relationship.⁶¹ Kazakhstan had served as a Soviet test range and missile launch site and was left with some 1,400 Soviet strategic nuclear warheads when the Soviet Union collapsed. Following independence, Kazakhstan cooperated closely with the United States to secure nuclear materials, transfer remaining nuclear weapons to Russia, and dismantle associated infrastructure.⁶² The United States has provided over \$500 million in assistance to Kazakhstan’s denuclearization and nonproliferation efforts.⁶³

Since 2015, U.S. bilateral relations with Kazakhstan have been complemented by the C5+1 diplomatic platform, which provides a forum for the governments of the United States and the five Central Asian countries to address the common challenges they face in areas such as security, economic connectivity, and environmental vulnerabilities. The State Department notes the format’s success in “enhancing regional dialogue, cooperation, and partnership among the participating countries” and contributions to “increasing economic and energy connectivity and trade, mitigating environmental and health challenges, jointly addressing security threats, and advocating for the full participation of women in all aspects of the political, economic, and social life of member countries.”⁶⁴ In September 2023, President Biden met with his five Central Asian counterparts in New York on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, marking the first-ever C5+1 presidential summit.⁶⁵ The resulting Joint Statement emphasized strengthening security cooperation, promoting economic resilience by increasing access to global markets and attracting sustainable international investment to Central Asia, enhancing Central Asia’s energy security and water security, promoting rule of law and democratic governance, and developing closer people-to-people ties as areas of ongoing cooperation between the United States and Central Asian countries.⁶⁶

U.S.-Kazakhstan Economic Relations

Bilateral trade in goods between the United States and Kazakhstan amounted to \$3.39 billion in 2023 (\$1.16 billion in exports to Kazakhstan, and \$2.23 in imports from Kazakhstan).⁶⁷ U.S.-Kazakhstan trade relations are governed by Section 402 of the Trade Act of 1974 (P.L. 93-618), the so-called Jackson-Vanik amendment (see “Issues for Congress” below). A Bilateral Investment Treaty and a Treaty on the Avoidance of Dual Taxation between the United States and Kazakhstan have been in force since 1994 and 1996, respectively.

According to official statistics, the stock of foreign direct investment in Kazakhstan, which is concentrated in the oil and gas sector, totaled \$169.2 billion as of January 2023, including \$43.83 billion from the United States.⁶⁸ Chevron and ExxonMobil have both maintained a presence in

⁶⁰ Senate Armed Services Committee, *Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, Commander, U.S. Central Command, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Posture of U.S. Central Command*, February 5, 2019.

⁶¹ U.S. Department of State: *U.S.-Kazakhstan Relations*, February 27, 2023.

⁶² See, for example, U.S. Mission Kazakhstan, “The Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) Has Been Carrying Out a Joint Nuclear Nonproliferation Mission with Kazakhstan for over 26 Years,” August 29, 2020.

⁶³ U.S. Department of State: *U.S.-Kazakhstan Relations*, February 27, 2023.

⁶⁴ U.S. Department of State, “Joint Statement on the C5+1 Virtual Ministerial,” May 4, 2021.

⁶⁵ The White House, “Readout of President Biden’s Meeting with the C5+1 Leaders at UNGA,” September 19, 2023.

⁶⁶ The White House, “C5+1 Leaders’ Joint Statement,” September 21, 2023.

⁶⁷ U.S. Census Bureau trade data.

⁶⁸ U.S. Department of State, *2023 Investment Climate Statements: Kazakhstan*, July 27, 2023.

Kazakhstan since 1993 and hold stakes in the consortia developing the country's major oil and gas fields.

The United States government is seeking to facilitate interactions between U.S. and Central Asian companies through the B5+1, envisioned as the business counterpart to C5+1 and implemented by the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE). B5+1 held an inaugural business forum in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in March 2024. The initiative aims to support closer regional economic integration and greater U.S. private sector trade and investment with Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries.

U.S. Foreign Assistance to Kazakhstan

U.S. assistance to Kazakhstan aims to support “Kazakhstan’s increasing efforts to exercise its own sovereignty and independence, while adopting a wave of reforms based on President Tokayev’s vision that addresses the political, social and economic needs of its citizens.”⁶⁹ U.S.-funded programs in Kazakhstan seek to build the capacity of civil society organizations, bolster independent media, strengthen the legislature, and promote a competitive political environment. Additionally, U.S. programs seek to support economic reform as well as national and regional energy security, support engagement with Kazakhstan on developing its critical minerals and other natural resources, assist in combatting infectious disease threats, and supporting Kazakhstan’s emerging leadership on climate security and resilience. Another focus of U.S. assistance to Kazakhstan is law enforcement and security cooperation, particularly military training and professionalization, fighting transnational crime, combatting weapons of mass destruction, and building capacities in border security.⁷⁰ The State Department requested \$21.2 million in appropriations for aid to Kazakhstan for FY2025, as compared to \$19.2 million requested for FY2024 and an estimated \$24.5 million allocated in FY2023.⁷¹

Table 2. U.S. Foreign Assistance to Kazakhstan
(\$ in thousands)

Account	FY2022 allocation	FY2023 estimate	FY2024 request	FY2025 request
Assistance to Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia	5,000	5,600	5,250	5,050
Global Health Programs—State	2,640	2,904	—	—
Global Health Programs—USAID	6,000	7,750	8,000	7,750
International Military Education and Training	794	900	1,100	1,100
International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement	3,000	4,000	4,000	4,000
Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs	800	3,300	800	3,300
Total	18,234	24,454	19,150	21,200

Source: U.S. Department of State, FY2025 and FY2024 Congressional Budget Justifications.

⁶⁹ U.S. Department of State, *FY2025 Congressional Budget Justification*, Appendix 2, p. 326.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28, 326, 347-348, 386, 408.

⁷¹ U.S. Department of State, FY2025 and FY2024 Congressional Budget Justifications, Supplementary Tables.

Relations with Russia and Implications of the War in Ukraine

As a former Soviet republic, Kazakhstan shares a common institutional legacy with Russia that underpins military, political, economic, and cultural ties. The two countries share the world's longest contiguous land border, and the Russian language has official status in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan hosts two Russian military installations: a missile defense testing site and a test flight center. Kazakhstan's Baikonur Cosmodrome, the largest spaceport in the world, is leased by the Russian government and serves as the sole launch site for Russia's manned space missions. Although previously under Russian military control, the spaceport is now managed by Russia's civilian space agency, Roscosmos.⁷² Additionally, Kazakhstan is a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, a single market that also includes Armenia, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan. Nevertheless, since independence, Kazakhstan has sought to establish itself as an independent player on the global stage.⁷³ In the assessment of one observer, Kazakhstan's continued ability to "balance its relations with China, Russia, and the West despite increasing geopolitical tensions" in the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine represents "a reminder of [Tokayev's] strong suit" as an experienced diplomat.⁷⁴

Some analysts speculated that the January 2022 Russia-led CSTO intervention in Kazakhstan would impact Kazakhstan's longstanding "multi-vector" foreign policy, leading to closer alignment with Russia.⁷⁵ In the aftermath of the unrest, Kazakh officials maintained that the country's multi-vector foreign policy stance remained unchanged.⁷⁶ President Tokayev directly rejected speculation that the CSTO intervention rendered him beholden to Moscow in a June 2022 interview with Russian media, calling it "totally unjustified" and "far from reality."⁷⁷ Kazakhstan has avoided endorsing Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine and has supplied Ukraine with humanitarian aid. Kazakh officials have expressed support for Ukraine's territorial integrity.⁷⁸ Some analysts see the fact that Kazakhstan abstained on the March 2022 United Nations vote condemning the Russian invasion rather than siding with Russia as indicative of hedging against Moscow.⁷⁹ Speaking at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in June 2022, President Tokayev reiterated his country's refusal to recognize the independence of the Russia-backed self-proclaimed republics in eastern Ukraine.

Since Russia's 2014 occupation of Ukraine's Crimea region, analysts have noted nervousness on the part of officials and the public in Kazakhstan about Russian statements, including by President Vladimir Putin, questioning Kazakhstan's sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁸⁰ Since

⁷² From 2011 to 2020, Baikonur served as the sole launch site for crewed missions to the International Space Station (ISS). Some NASA astronauts traveling to the ISS continue to do so on Russian Soyuz rockets launched from Baikonur.

⁷³ See, for example, Wilder Alejandro Sanchez, "A Rising Global Player: Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy in the 2020s," *Kennan Cable* No. 51, May 2020.

⁷⁴ Chris Ricketon, "Toqaev's Kazakhstan Still Fighting Fires 5 Years After Replacing Nazarbaev," *RFE/RL*, June 10, 2024.

⁷⁵ See, for example, Luca Anceschi, "Kazakhstan: Secrets, Lies, and Foreign Troops," Carnegie Europe, January 11, 2022; Valerie Hopkins, "Amid Crisis, Kazakhstan's Leader Chose His Path: Embrace Russia," *New York Times*, January 8, 2022.

⁷⁶ CRS communication with Kazakh government official, January 24, 2022.

⁷⁷ Joanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan-Russia Frictions over Ukraine War Go Public," *Eurasianet*, June 20, 2022.

⁷⁸ Georgi Gotev, "Kazakh Official: We Will Not Risk Being Placed in the Same Basket as Russia," *Euractiv*, March 29, 2022.

⁷⁹ Paul Stronski, "The Common Theme in Central Asia's Response to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 30, 2022.

⁸⁰ Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan Bolsters Defenses amid Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *Eurasianet*, April 14, 2022.

Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russian politicians and political commentators have repeatedly insinuated that a similar fate may await Kazakhstan.⁸¹ For example, an August 2022 social media post on the account of Russia's former President Dmitry Medvedev referred to Kazakhstan as an "artificial state" whose territory should be returned to Russia; the post was quickly deleted, and a Medvedev aide claimed the account had been hacked.⁸²

Economic Impacts

Because Kazakhstan's economy is closely tied to Russia's, the war in Ukraine is likely to have ongoing repercussions for Kazakhstan. In addition to being Kazakhstan's second-largest trading partner, Russia serves as an important transit route for supply chains into and out of landlocked Kazakhstan.⁸³ Western sanctions on Russia and disruptions to global commodities markets resulting from the war have led to inflationary pressure in Kazakhstan, with inflation on foodstuffs reaching nearly 20% in July 2022.⁸⁴ Moreover, Kazakhstan's currency is highly vulnerable to fluctuations in the value of the Russian ruble.⁸⁵ Overall, experts assess that Kazakhstan's economy has so far proven more resilient than initially anticipated, but note continued exposure to political and economic risks due to close integration with Russia.⁸⁶

In light of international sanctions, Kazakhstan is seeking to decrease its dependence on transit routes through Russia and to diversify its trade relationships. The majority of Kazakhstan's oil exports are supplied to global markets through Russian territory via the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC, see **Figure 2**), which terminates at Novorossiysk, a major Black Sea port that also houses a large Russian naval base. Russia has halted CPC oil flows multiple times since March 2022, in what some analysts see as retaliation for Kazakhstan's refusal to support Russian aggression in Ukraine; oil from Kazakhstan accounted for 88% of CPC shipments in 2022.⁸⁷ In August 2023, Ukraine declared that it sees Russian ports and ships on the Black Sea as valid military targets.⁸⁸ A potential Ukrainian attack on infrastructure at Novorossiysk could severely disrupt Kazakhstan's oil exports. Although still small as a portion of Kazakhstan's overall oil exports, exports of Kazakhstan's oil by tanker across the Caspian Sea, bypassing Russia, have risen sharply since February 2022.⁸⁹ Kazakhstan's export capacity across the Caspian remains hampered by existing port infrastructure constraints and limited tanker capacity.⁹⁰

⁸¹ Joanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan-Russia Frictions over Ukraine War Go Public," *Eurasianet*, June 20, 2022; "Medvedev Questions Neighbors' Sovereignty in 'Hacked' Post," *The Moscow Times*, August 2, 2022.

⁸² "Medvedev Questions Neighbors' Sovereignty in 'Hacked' Post," *The Moscow Times*, August 2, 2022.

⁸³ Nizom Khodjayev, "Kazakh Businesses Reliant on Russia for Re-exports Wary of Knock-On Effects of War Sanctions," *bne IntelliNews*, April 27, 2022.

⁸⁴ Catherine Putz, "Kazakhstan: After the Pandemic Recovery, New Pressures from the Ukraine War," *The Diplomat*, April 12, 2022; Joanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan: No Sugarcoating the Bitter Pill of Inflation and Shortages," *Eurasianet*, July 14, 2022.

⁸⁵ "Central Asia Currencies Feeling Heavy Pressure from Ruble's Tumble," *Eurasianet*, February 28, 2022.

⁸⁶ OECD, *Diversifying Kazakhstan's Exports: Institutions, Policies, Infrastructures*, 2024, p. 18.

⁸⁷ Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakh Oil Exports Across Russia Interrupted for Fourth Time This Year," *Eurasianet*, August 23, 2022; Joanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan Bullish on Oil Exports Despite Fallout of War," *Eurasianet*, March 9, 2023.

⁸⁸ Gabriel Gavin, "Ukraine Declares War on Russia's Black Sea Shipping," *Politico*, August 8, 2023. See also State Service of Sea and River Transport of Ukraine, Coastal Warning 118/23, August 4, 2023.

⁸⁹ "Exclusive: Kazakhstan Has Ramped Up Oil Exports Bypassing Russia," Reuters, April 21, 2023.

⁹⁰ Haley Nelson, "Kazakhstan Sends Second Oil Shipment Across the Caspian Sea to Baku," Caspian Policy Center, March 29, 2023.

Figure 2. Map of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium

Source: Map created by CRS using data from S&P Global, the U.S. Department of State, and Esri.

Some analysts assess that sanctions on Russia present potential opportunities for Kazakhstan as companies consider relocating their operations or redirecting transit routes through Kazakhstan, which has long sought to position itself as a Eurasian transport and logistics hub.⁹¹ Kazakh officials have indicated that Russian companies not subject to Western sanctions are welcome to relocate to Kazakhstan.⁹² Similarly, Kazakhstan is presenting itself as an alternative for Western companies that seek to maintain a presence in the region after leaving Russia.⁹³

Russian Nationals in Kazakhstan

The war has brought an unprecedented influx of Russian citizens into Kazakhstan.⁹⁴ An initial wave of Russian migration to Central Asia shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine began comprised largely of tech workers and others who could work remotely.⁹⁵ A second, larger wave of migrants followed Russia's announcement of "partial mobilization" on September 21, 2022,

⁹¹ Nizom Khodjayev, "Russia's Sanctions Woes Could Be a Shot in the Arm for Kazakhstan ... or the Kiss of a Dead Man," *bne IntelliNews*, March 29, 2022; Catherin Putz, "Bad Business Climate in Russia a Boon for Kazakhstan," *The Diplomat*, April 27, 2022.

⁹² Nizom Khodjayev, "Russia's Sanctions Woes Could Be a Shot in the Arm for Kazakhstan ... or the Kiss of a Dead Man," *bne IntelliNews*, March 29, 2022; Catherine Putz, "Bad Business Climate in Russia a Boon for Kazakhstan," *The Diplomat*, April 27, 2022; "Kazakh Minister Sees No Problem with Russian Motorcycle Producer's Plan to Move Due to Sanctions," *RFE/RL*, April 26, 2022; Georgi Gotev, "Kazakh Official: We Will Not Risk Being Placed in the Same Basket as Russia," *Euractiv*, March 29, 2022.

⁹³ Sarah Anne Aarup and America Hernandez, "Kazakhstan Says It Will Help EU Companies Sell T-shirts and Sneakers to Russia," *Politico*, March 30, 2022.

⁹⁴ See Joanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan: New Migration Rules to Hit Russians Fleeing the Draft," *Eurasianet*, January 17, 2023.

⁹⁵ Ayzirek Imanaliyeva, "Kyrgyzstan Joins the List of Countries Favored by Russia's Emigres," *Eurasianet*, March 18, 2022; "Uzbekistan Lays Out the Red Carpet for Fleeing Russian IT Specialists," *Eurasianet*, March 16, 2022.

and included many with fewer financial resources. Between September 21 and October 5 of that year, more than 200,000 Russian citizens entered Kazakhstan, which shares a 4,750-mile land border with Russia.⁹⁶ Large-scale travel by Russian citizens to Central Asia continued in the following weeks. While many Russians used Central Asia as a transit point before traveling elsewhere, hundreds of thousands remain in the region, with as many as 300,000 in Kazakhstan.⁹⁷

Potential Sanctions Evasion

Some observers have raised concerns about potential secondary sanctions on Kazakhstan if the country is used to circumvent sanctions on Russia, and the resulting economic fallout.⁹⁸ In June 2022, the U.S. Department of Commerce included Kazakhstan on a list of countries that serve as “common transshipment points through which restricted or controlled exports have been known to pass before reaching destinations in Russia or Belarus.”⁹⁹ Kazakh officials have stated that while their country will maintain economic ties to Russia, Kazakhstan intends to abide by Western sanctions and that the country “will not be a tool to circumvent the sanctions on Russia by the U.S. and the EU [European Union].”¹⁰⁰ In November 2022 remarks to the press, Kazakhstan’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs stated “our territory has not been used and will not be used for sanctions evasion in any form,” adding that “the principled position of Kazakhstan is that Kazakhstan does not allow its territory to be used to circumvent sanctions.”¹⁰¹ Some analysts view sanctions compliance as a question of economic self-preservation for Central Asia, rather than a means of signaling disapproval of Russia’s invasion or support for the West.¹⁰² On August 16, 2023, the U.S. Department of the Treasury imposed sanctions on a Kazakhstan-based entity controlled by a Slovakian national for ties to a sanctions evasion network attempting to support arms deals between Russia and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.¹⁰³ Kazakhstan’s National Economy Ministry subsequently stated that the entity in question had not been active since 2021 and that its sanctions designation was “of a technical nature.”¹⁰⁴

According to some press reports, Kazakhstan is functioning as a transit route for so-called “parallel imports” to Russia, whereby goods are imported to Kazakhstan and then re-exported to Russia.¹⁰⁵ Analysis by one source determined that there was a significant increase in consumer electronics imports to Kazakhstan from the EU in the first half of 2022, coinciding with an

⁹⁶ “Why the Exodus of Russians to Central Asia Matters,” *The Economist*, October 12, 2022.

⁹⁷ CRS communication with Kazakh officials, May 2022.

⁹⁸ Nizom Khodjayev, “Russia’s Sanctions Woes Could Be a Shot in the Arm for Kazakhstan ... or the Kiss of a Dead Man,” *bne IntelliNews*, March 29, 2022.

⁹⁹ U.S. Treasury, Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, “FinCEN and the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Industry and Security Urge Increased Vigilance for Potential Russian and Belarusian Export Control Evasion Attempts,” June 28, 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Georgi Gotev, “Kazakh Official: We Will Not Risk Being Placed in the Same Basket as Russia,” *Euractiv*, March 29, 2022.

¹⁰¹ Kazakhstan ne pozvoliaet ispol’zovat’ svoiu territoriu dlia obkhoda sanktsii—MID” [Kazakhstan does not allow its territory to be used to circumvent sanctions—MFA], *KazTAG*, November 30, 2022, as translated by CRS.

¹⁰² Temur Umarov, “Russia and Central Asia: Never Closer, or Drifting Apart?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 23, 2022.

¹⁰³ U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Entities Tied to Arms Deals Between North Korea and Russia,” August 16, 2023.

¹⁰⁴ “Ministerstvo sdelalo zaiavlenie iz-za sanktsii SShA protiv kazakhstanskoi kompanii” [Ministry made statement due to sanctions against Kazakhstani company], *Tengri News*, August 17, 2023.

¹⁰⁵ “Russia’s Parallel Imports Hindered by Central Asia Bottleneck,” *Eurasianet*, April 10, 2023.

increase in shipments of such products from Kazakhstan to Russia.¹⁰⁶ European officials have reportedly expressed concern that components and microchips from such appliances transiting through Kazakhstan may be used by Russia for military purposes as a means of circumventing sanctions, although analysts assess that much of the spike in Kazakhstan’s exports to Russia represents an “opportunistic” means of meeting Russian consumer demand and “workarounds for transportation restrictions.”¹⁰⁷ The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, an international network of investigative journalists, additionally found that Russian citizens have established companies in Kazakhstan in order to import sensitive electronics such as drones and microchips.¹⁰⁸ Kazakhstan introduced a new system to more closely monitor re-exports in April 2023.¹⁰⁹ In 2023, another source reported that, since February 2022, at least \$1 billion in dual use items—goods with both civil and military application—subject to EU export controls likely ended up in Russia under the pretense of shipment from the EU to Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, indicating that Russia is potentially sidestepping sanctions via falsified EU customs declarations.¹¹⁰ Kazakh officials argue that export control is a shared responsibility and should take place at the point of origin.¹¹¹

Relations with China

Like the rest of Central Asia, Kazakhstan is developing closer economic and security ties with China. Some observers contend that China is increasingly challenging Russia’s influence in Central Asia in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine.¹¹² Kazakhstan is seen as a key country in the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt—one of the main corridors of the PRC’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—and has received significant amounts of financing from PRC entities to construct transport and energy infrastructure. In 2023, China eclipsed Russia as Kazakhstan’s largest trade partner.¹¹³

At the same time, public opinion surveys indicate that many in Kazakhstan remain wary of China, with Sinophobic attitudes fueled by fears of potential Chinese territorial encroachment, resentment of Chinese labor migrants, local corruption scandals linked to PRC-backed projects, and anger at the PRC’s repression of Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim minorities, including ethnic Kazakhs, in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁶ Alberto Nardelli, Bryce Baschuk, and Marc Champion, “Putin Stirs European Worry on Home Appliance Imports Stripped for Arms,” *Bloomberg*, October 29, 2022.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, Bastian Benrath, “The Kazakh Connection Shows How Europe’s Russia Trade Is Flowing,” *Bloomberg*, February 29, 2024.

¹⁰⁸ Maria Zholobova, Benjamin Bidder, Vyacheslav Abramov, and Ilya Lozovsky, “Kazakhstan Has Become a Pathway for the Supply of Russia’s War Machine. Here’s How It Works,” Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Network, May 19, 2023.

¹⁰⁹ Joanna Lillis, “Kazakhstan Poised to Intensify Vetting of Re-exports to Russia,” *Eurasianet*, March 22, 2023; Catherine Putz, “Kazakhstan Moves to Curtail Parallel Trade to Russia,” *The Diplomat*, May 10, 2023.

¹¹⁰ Chris Cook, Federica Cocco, and Max Seddon, “EU Goods Worth at Least \$1bn Vanish in Russia ‘Ghost Trade,’” *Financial Times*, May 10, 2023.

¹¹¹ CRS communication with Kazakh government official, April 15, 2024.

¹¹² “Xi Invites C. Asian Leaders to First Summit in China,” Agence France Presse, March 21, 2023; Rakshith Shetty, “From Russian Ladas to Chinese BYDs: Central Asia’s Changing Priorities,” *The Diplomat*, July 11, 2024.

¹¹³ Assel Satubaldina, “Close-Up Look at Kazakhstan’s Foreign Trade: China Becomes Top Trade Partner, as Non-Commodity Exports to Asia Rise,” *The Astana Times*, February 27, 2024.

¹¹⁴ Eric McGlinchey and Marlene Laruelle, “Explaining Great Power Status in Central Asia: Unfamiliarity and Discontent,” Minerva Research Initiative, October 29, 2019.

Anti-Chinese sentiment and cross-border ties with communities in the XUAR make the PRC's treatment of ethnic and religious minorities in the XUAR a charged domestic issue for Kazakhstan, particularly because Xinjiang detainees have included both family members of citizens of Kazakhstan and naturalized citizens of Kazakhstan.¹¹⁵ Kazakhstan has an ethnic Uyghur population of about 300,000, while Xinjiang is home to roughly 1.6 million ethnic Kazakhs, who constitute the third-largest Muslim group in China and the second-largest Turkic-speaking group in the XUAR, after Uyghurs.¹¹⁶

Although Kazakhstan's government has refrained from open criticism of China on Xinjiang, Kazakh diplomats reportedly worked behind the scenes to secure the release of some ethnic Kazakh detainees who were citizens or in the process of becoming citizens of Kazakhstan.¹¹⁷ In January 2019, Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that China had granted 2,000 ethnic Kazakhs permission to emigrate to Kazakhstan from Xinjiang.¹¹⁸ Relatives of detainees regularly protest the treatment of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang outside of China's diplomatic missions in Kazakhstan.¹¹⁹ The government of Kazakhstan has cracked down on Xinjiang-related activism within the country, however, arresting protestors and leading one prominent activist to leave the country after he was convicted on "extremism" charges.¹²⁰

Relations with Afghanistan

Since the August 2021 fall of the Afghan government, Kazakhstan and its Central Asian neighbors have generally adopted a pragmatic approach toward the Taliban.¹²¹ Taliban leaders have reportedly stated that they will not violate the territorial integrity of Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors, and that they do not pose a threat to the region.¹²² Although Kazakhstan has not formally recognized the Taliban government, the country maintains an embassy in Kabul and has granted diplomatic accreditation to Taliban representatives in Kazakhstan.¹²³ In December 2023, the government of Kazakhstan removed the Taliban from its list of banned extremist

¹¹⁵ Marlene Laruelle and Dylan Royce, "No Great Game: Central Asia's Public Opinions on Russia, China, and the U.S.," *Kennan Cable*, no. 56 (August 2020); Reid Standish and Aigerim Toleukhan, "Kazakhs Won't Be Silenced on China's Internment Camps," *Foreign Policy*, March 4, 2019.

¹¹⁶ Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *The Number of Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan by Selected Ethnic Groups at the Beginning of 2024*, April 22, 2024, at <https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/social-statistics/demography/publications/157662/>; Emma Svoboda, "Has Kazakhstan Failed Xinjiang's Ethnic Kazakhs?" *Lawfare*, April 5, 2021.

¹¹⁷ Catherine Putz, "Carefully, Kazakhstan Confronts China About Kazakhs in Xinjiang Re-Education Camps," *The Diplomat*, June 14, 2018; Standish and Toleukhanova, "Kazakhs Won't Be Silenced on China's Internment Camps."

¹¹⁸ Bohr et al., *Kazakhstan: Tested By Transition*, p. 92.

¹¹⁹ Reid Standish and Aigerim Toleukhanova, "Kazakh Activism Against China's Internment Camps Is Broken, but Not Dead," *RFE/RL*, April 4, 2021; Nurtai Lakhanuly, "Zaderzhaniia, aresty, shtrafy. Tri goda protestov pered kitaiskim konsul'stvom" [Detentions, arrests, fines. Three years of protests at the Chinese consulate], *RFE/RL*, February 13, 2024.

¹²⁰ Bruce Pannier, "Activist Defending Ethnic Kazakhs in China Explains Why He Had to Flee Kazakhstan," *RFE/RL*, January 18, 2021; "Kazakhstan: Activist Detained for Hypothetical Anti-China Picket," *Eurasianet*, July 1, 2021; Nurgul Tapaeva, "Kazakh Police Detain Demonstrators Protesting Relatives' Detention in China's Xinjiang," *RFE/RL*, October 1, 2021.

¹²¹ See, for example, Gavin Helf and Barmak Pazhwak, "Central Asia Prepares for Taliban Takeover," United States Institute of Peace, July 20, 2021.

¹²² Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russian Envoy Expects Taliban Not to Threaten Central Asia," Associated Press, July 14, 2021; Vladimir Isachenkov, "Taliban Visit Moscow to Say Their Wins Don't Threaten Russia," Associated Press, July 8, 2021; "As Tajikistan Mobilizes 20,000 Troops, Taliban Says It Poses No Threat," *Eurasianet*, July 6, 2021.

¹²³ Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan Accredits Taliban Envoys Without Recognizing Government," *Eurasianet*, April 19, 2023.

organizations, to which the group had been added in 2005.¹²⁴ At a June 2024 meeting with parliamentary speakers from CSTO countries, Tokayev explained this decision as motivated by “the importance of developing trade and economic cooperation with contemporary Afghanistan and the understanding that this regime is a long-term factor.”¹²⁵ Bilateral trade between Kazakhstan and Afghanistan, the bulk of which comprises exports of flour from Kazakhstan, doubled between 2021 and 2022, reaching about \$1 billion, and has continued to increase.¹²⁶ In August 2023, an inaugural Afghanistan-Kazakhstan business forum took place in Astana.¹²⁷

Terrorism and Violent Extremism

According to Kazakhstan’s National Security Committee, an estimated 800 Kazakh nationals left the country for Middle East conflict zones prior to the territorial defeat of the Islamic State (IS) in 2019; the majority were children.¹²⁸ It is unclear how many of the Kazakhs who travelled to IS-controlled territories were killed over the course of the conflict. As of July 2018, Kazakhstan’s National Security Committee had information on over 260 deaths, and authorities estimated that 112 adults and 81 children had returned to Kazakhstan. The government of Kazakhstan had imprisoned about half of the returned adults, and had the remainder under surveillance.¹²⁹ Since 2019, Kazakhstan has repatriated more than 600 of its nationals, primarily women and children, from Syria and Iraq. The United States provided logistical support for these efforts, and the U.S.-funded United States Institute of Peace has supported rehabilitation programs for returnees throughout Central Asia.¹³⁰

Since the fall of the Afghan government in 2021, analysts have noted an increase in the production and dissemination of propaganda and recruitment materials targeting Central Asians by the Islamic State’s regional affiliate in Afghanistan, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).¹³¹ Researchers observe that Central Asians, primarily Tajiks, have accounted for a “notable share” of ISKP-directed or -inspired attacks and attempted attacks against the United States, Europe, Turkey, and Iran since 2021.¹³² In March 2024, Russian security forces killed two Kazakh nationals who were allegedly planning an ISKP attack on a synagogue.¹³³ At the same time, independent observers have expressed concerns that the government of Kazakhstan uses

¹²⁴ Almaz Kumenov, “Kazakhstan Removes Taliban from List of Banned Organizations,” *Eurasianet*, December 30, 2023.

¹²⁵ Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Prezident Kazakhstana provel vstrechu so spikerami palat parlamentov stran ODKB” [The President of Kazakhstan conducted a meeting with parliamentary speakers from CSTO countries], June 3, 2024.

¹²⁶ Almaz Kumenov, “Kazakhstan Accredits Taliban Envoys Without Recognizing Government,” *Eurasianet*, April 19, 2023; Dosym Satpaev, “Pochemu Kazakhstan sotrudnichaet s talibami i k chemu eto privedet?” [Why does Kazakhstan cooperate with the Taliban and what will it lead to?], *Forbes Kazakhstan*, August 9, 2023.

¹²⁷ Dosym Satpaev, “Pochemu Kazakhstan sotrudnichaet s talibami i k chemu eto privedet?” [Why does Kazakhstan cooperate with the Taliban and what will it lead to?], *Forbes Kazakhstan*, August 9, 2023.

¹²⁸ “Skol’ko kazakhstantsev nakhoditsia za reshetkoi v Sirii i Irake?” [How many Kazakhstanis are behind bars in Syria and Iraq?], *Radio Azattyq*, July 31, 2018.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ William B. Farrell, Rustam Burnashev, Rustam Azizi, and Bakhtiyar Babadjanov, *Processes of Reintegrating Central Asian Returnees from Syria and Iraq*, United States Institute of Peace Special Report No. 498, July 2021.

¹³¹ See, for example, Lucas Webber and Riccardo Valle, “Islamic State Khorasan’s Expanded Vision in South and Central Asia,” *The Diplomat*, August 26, 2022 and Lucas Webber, “ISKP Posing Rising Threat to Central Asia,” *Eurasianet*, June 25, 2024.

¹³² Lucas Webber and Riccardo Valle, “The Islamic State’s Central Asian Contingents and Their International Threat,” Hudson Institute, October 16, 2023.

¹³³ Catherine Putz, “Alleged ISKP Plot Foiled in Russia, 2 Kazakh Citizens Killed,” *The Diplomat*, March 11, 2024.

terrorism and “extremism” laws to target government critics and marginalize political opposition groups.¹³⁴

Issues for Congress

Trade

Kazakhstan’s government is seeking to diversify the country’s economic relationships, and some Members of Congress have expressed interest in expanding U.S.-Kazakhstan economic engagement and assisting Kazakhstan in diversifying its trade relationships away from Russia.¹³⁵ U.S. trade with Kazakhstan is governed by Section 402 of the Trade Act of 1974 (P.L. 93-618), commonly known as the Jackson-Vanik amendment.¹³⁶ This section denies normal trade relations (NTR) status to some current and former nonmarket economy countries unless they adhere to certain freedom-of-emigration requirements. Congress passed this legislation in response to restrictions on emigration from the Soviet Union that disproportionately affected Jews. Since 1992, Kazakhstan has received temporary NTR status under a provision of the amendment that allows the President to extend NTR status to a country affected by the amendment by either waiving the amendment’s freedom-of-emigration requirements or determining that the country is not in violation of those requirements, subject to annual review. Successive U.S. presidential administrations have certified Kazakhstan as compliant since 1997. A complete lifting of Jackson-Vanik applicability requires Congress to pass legislation authorizing the President to extend permanent NTR (PNTR) status to a given country.¹³⁷ Legislation that would have exempted Kazakhstan was introduced in previous Congresses but did not make it out of committee.¹³⁸ H.R. 3611 and S. 2748, introduced in the 118th Congress, would authorize the President to determine that Jackson-Vanik should no longer apply to Kazakhstan and to extend PNTR. Jackson-Vanik is a major focus of Kazakhstan’s engagement with Congress.

The Biden Administration supports lifting Jackson-Vanik for Kazakhstan, arguing that doing so would signal U.S. commitment to economic engagement at a time when the United States is

¹³⁴ See, for example, Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2024: Kazakhstan*; Human Rights Watch, “Kazakhstan: Crackdown on Government Critics,” July 7, 2021; U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2022: Kazakhstan*, November 30, 2023.

¹³⁵ See, for example, “House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia Holds Hearing on Fiscal Year 2024 Budget for South and Central Asian Affairs,” *CQ Congressional Transcripts*, July 13, 2023.

¹³⁶ See CRS In Focus IF12556, *The Jackson-Vanik Amendment and Permanent Normal Trade Relations*, by Maria A. Blackwood, Cathleen D. Cimino-Isaacs, and Liana Wong.

¹³⁷ Congress has passed legislation authorizing the President to determine that Jackson-Vanik should no longer apply to Albania, Armenia, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Georgia, Hungary, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Mongolia, the PRC, Romania, Russia, Ukraine, and Vietnam; those countries (and, in the case of Czechoslovakia, its successor states) all received permanent NTR (PNTR) status. Jackson-Vanik applied de facto to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as constituent republics of the Soviet Union. Because the United States did not recognize their forcible incorporation into the USSR during World War II, Congress terminated the applicability of Jackson-Vanik to these three countries after the restoration of their independence in 1991. Russia’s NTR status was suspended in response to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. See 19 U.S.C. §2434. The Jackson-Vanik Amendment continues to apply to Uzbekistan, and its Central Asian neighbors Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, as well as Azerbaijan, Belarus, Cuba, and North Korea. Like Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan receive conditional NTR status, subject to annual review. Belarus previously received temporary NTR status under the waiver provision, but it was suspended in response to Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Cuba and North Korea do not receive NTR status.

¹³⁸ These bills include: 117th Congress: H.R. 5544, H.R. 9322; 115th Congress: H.R. 4067; 114th Congress: H.R. 3400, H.R. 4219, S. 3413; 112th Congress: H.R. 1102; 111th Congress: H.R. 876, H.R. 2631, S. 282; 110th Congress: H.R. 2415, S. 2562; 109th Congress: H.R. 4004; 108th Congress: H.R. 3708; 107th Congress: H.R. 1318, S. 168.

seeking to help Kazakhstan diversify away from Russia, and that it would boost trade and investment opportunities for U.S. businesses.¹³⁹ Because Kazakhstan receives conditional NTR status, it is possible that repealing Jackson-Vanik applicability would have limited practical impact on trade volumes. In light of the issue's significance for the government of Kazakhstan, however, repeal would potentially have an outsized positive impact on overall bilateral relations. In July 2023 testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, a Biden Administration official asserted that Jackson-Vanik "holds back the relationship that we have" with Kazakhstan.¹⁴⁰ Given that the majority of Kazakhstan's Jewish population has emigrated to the United States or Israel since 1991, some proponents of repeal argue that Jackson-Vanik, which initially addressed Soviet restrictions on Jewish emigration, is outdated. Others posit that it is inconsistent with U.S. policy toward Central Asia, arguing that it views these countries through the lens of the Soviet Union rather than as independent states. One Senator has described the continued application of Jackson-Vanik as a "bilateral irritant" for U.S.-Kazakhstan relations.¹⁴¹

Some stakeholders argue that Jackson-Vanik grants the United States leverage on human rights issues. For example, in its 2024 Annual Report, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended that Congress condition repealing Jackson-Vanik for Kazakhstan on "meaningful improvement to freedom of religion or belief, including removing exit bans on individuals penalized for their peaceful religious activities."¹⁴² In July 2023 congressional testimony, a Biden Administration official argued, "We think there are other tools we can use to push these countries on their human rights record," adding that Jackson-Vanik is "no longer the tool that it used to be."¹⁴³

Certain U.S. imports from Kazakhstan have been eligible to receive duty-free treatment under the U.S. Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), a trade preference program that expands market access for eligible developing countries.¹⁴⁴ GSP authorization lapsed at the end of 2020, but there has been bipartisan interest in reauthorization of the program. In 2018, the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) initiated a review of Kazakhstan's GSP eligibility in response to a petition from the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), based on concerns related to Kazakhstan's compliance with worker rights requirements for GSP. AFL-CIO alleged that the government of Kazakhstan was actively restricting the right to form trade unions and employer associations.¹⁴⁵ As of December 2020, the review was ongoing.¹⁴⁶

¹³⁹ "Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism Holds Hearing on Central Asia," *CQ Congressional Transcripts*, March 8, 2023.

¹⁴⁰ "House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia Holds Hearing on Fiscal Year 2024 Budget for South and Central Asian Affairs," *CQ Congressional Transcripts*, July 13, 2023.

¹⁴¹ Senator Chris Murphy, "A Cold War-Era Amendment Is Preventing a Deepening of U.S. Relations with Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, July 26, 2023.

¹⁴² U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2024 Annual Report*, May 2024, p. 60.

¹⁴³ "House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia Holds Hearing on Fiscal Year 2024 Budget for South and Central Asian Affairs," *CQ Congressional Transcripts*, July 13, 2023.

¹⁴⁴ See CRS Report RL33663, *Generalized System of Preferences (GSP): Overview and Issues for Congress*, by Liana Wong.

¹⁴⁵ Office of the United States Trade Representative, "USTR Announces New GSP Eligibility Reviews of India, Indonesia, and Kazakhstan," April 12, 2018.

¹⁴⁶ USTR does not anticipate moving toward final determinations as long as the GSP program remains without authorization, but will continue to engage with stakeholders involved in ongoing country practice reviews. See Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, "GSP Expiration: Frequently Asked Questions," January 2021, at <https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/gsp/GSPExpiration2021.pdf>.

Security Cooperation

In March 2023 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Donald Lu stated that the war in Ukraine has created new opportunities for security cooperation between the United States and Central Asia, noting Central Asian countries' desires to diversify the sourcing of their defense equipment away from Russia as well as the success of the National Guard's State Partnership Program in the region.¹⁴⁷ In written testimony submitted to the House Armed Services Committee in March 2024, General Erik Kurilla, Commander of U.S. Central Command, stated that Russia's invasions of Georgia and Ukraine, and its subsequent military performance, have resulted in a "generational opportunity" to strengthen and expand U.S. security cooperation with Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries because they raise doubts about Russia's reliability as a security partner.¹⁴⁸ Some scholars and U.S. officials have identified training and professional military education as areas of opportunity for expanding security cooperation between the United States and Central Asian countries.¹⁴⁹ Some Members of Congress have expressed concerns about U.S. security assistance to Kazakhstan in light of human rights issues, however. In October 2022, in response to reports that security forces that had received training from the United States in order to participate in international peacekeeping missions were deployed during Kazakhstan's January 2022 unrest and were potentially implicated in human rights abuses, a group of U.S. Senators requested that the State Department review U.S. security assistance to Kazakhstan and the steps being taken by the Department to ensure that no U.S. assistance goes to law enforcement or military personnel implicated in human rights violations, noting, "it is imperative that we evaluate the effectiveness and use of U.S. security assistance."¹⁵⁰

Following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, one Kazakh official cited Senate ratification of the negative security assurance protocol of the Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (CANWFZ) treaty as an example of "low-hanging fruit" that would demonstrate U.S. commitment to developing relations with Central Asia, noting that the institutionalization of the CANWFZ has gained new strategic meaning.¹⁵¹ The CANWFZ treaty, which entered into force in 2009, prohibits the production, acquisition, stationing, storage, or use of nuclear weapons on the territory of the five Central Asian states. Like other nuclear-weapon-free zone (NWFZ) treaties, CANWFZ includes a protocol to be signed and ratified by the five nuclear weapon states (the United States, China, France, Russia, and the United Kingdom), pledging that they will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against the countries in the zone, also called negative security assurances.¹⁵² One expert argues that negative security assurances, similar to those in the NWFZ

¹⁴⁷ "Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism Holds Hearing on Central Asia," *CQ Congressional Transcripts*, March 8, 2023.

¹⁴⁸ Statement for the Record, General Michael "Erik" Kurilla, Commander, U.S. Central Command, Before the House Armed Services Committee on the Posture of U.S. Central Command: Two Visions for the Future of the Central Region, March 7, 2024.

¹⁴⁹ Erica Marat, "China's Expanding Military Education Diplomacy in Central Asia," PONARS Eurasia, April 19, 2021; Karoun Demirjian, "U.S. Works to Scale Up Intelligence Networks in Central Asia," *Washington Post*, June 21, 2022.

¹⁵⁰ Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "Menendez, Cardin, Durbin, Brown Call for Review of U.S. Security Assistance to Kazakhstan," October 7, 2022.

¹⁵¹ Remarks by Kazakh Ambassador Yerzhan Ashikbayev at the Kennan Institute, May 2, 2023, available at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/future-central-asias-development-between-russia-and-china>.

¹⁵² United Nations Office of Disarmament Affairs, Treaty on a Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone in Central Asia (CANWFZ), available at <https://treaties.unoda.org/t/canwfz>. See also CRS Report RL33865, *Arms Control and Nonproliferation: A Catalog of Treaties and Agreements*, by Paul K. Kerr and Mary Beth D. Nikitin.

protocols, have become increasingly significant in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹⁵³ The United States signed the CANWFZ protocol in 2014. President Barack Obama sent it to the Senate for its advice and consent for ratification in 2015, stating, "ratification of the Protocol is in the best interest of the United States, as it will enhance U.S. security by furthering our objective of preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons [and] strengthen our relations with the states and the people of Central Asia."¹⁵⁴ China, France, Russia, and the United Kingdom have ratified the CANWFZ protocol.¹⁵⁵ The Biden Administration supports the ratification of the CANWFZ protocol.¹⁵⁶ The protocol remains on the calendar of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Energy and Natural Resources

Promoting energy security within Central Asia, including by supporting a transition to renewable energy sources, is a stated goal of U.S. policy in the region.¹⁵⁷ Congress could consider whether existing programs are effective, and whether and how they should potentially be expanded. Although it is a gas producer, Kazakhstan has experienced domestic energy crises in recent winters due to increased domestic demand combined with infrastructural deficiencies.

Some Members of Congress have expressed interest in sourcing critical minerals from Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries as an alternative to China. Some analysts posit that U.S. imports of uranium product from Kazakhstan may increase in light of the Prohibiting Russian Uranium Imports Act (P.L. 118-62).¹⁵⁸ One expert testified to the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe in March 2024 that U.S. "pursuit of critical materials with Central Asia is a very important part of thinking about the future because bringing enrichment and processing back to the United States is more urgent" than expanding mining in the United States.¹⁵⁹ Although Kazakhstan is rich in a wide range of critical minerals, aging mining infrastructure and a lack of comprehensive modern survey data are among the obstacles to increased critical minerals output.

¹⁵³ Francesca Giovannini, "Negative Security Assurances After Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Arms Control Today*, July/August 2022, at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-07/features/negative-security-assurances-after-russias-invasion-ukraine/>.

¹⁵⁴ U.S. Senate, "Message from the President of the United States Transmitting the Protocol to the Treaty on a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia, Signed at New York on May 6, 2014," 114th Congress, 1st Session, Treaty Doc. 114-2, 2015.

¹⁵⁵ See United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, "Protocol to the Treaty on a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia," at https://treaties.unoda.org/t/canwfz_protocol. The United States has similarly signed but not ratified Protocols to the African and South Pacific NWFZ treaties. All three remain on the Senate calendar. The United States ratified the protocols to the Latin American NWFZ. See United Nations Platform for Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones, "Protocols to the Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone Treaties," at <https://www.un.org/nwzf/content/protocols-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-treaties>, and CRS Report RL33865, *Arms Control and Nonproliferation: A Catalog of Treaties and Agreements*, by Paul K. Kerr and Mary Beth D. Nikitin.

¹⁵⁶ U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva, "Ambassador Bruce Turner's Remarks to the Conference on Disarmament on Nuclear Weapon Free Zones," January 31, 2023.

¹⁵⁷ See, for example, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, "United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity (Overview)," February 5, 2020, and U.S. Agency for International Development, "USAID Power Central Asia," at <https://www.usaid.gov/central-asia-regional/fact-sheets/usaid-power-central-asia>.

¹⁵⁸ Wilder Alejandro Sanchez, "Could Kazakhstan's Uranium Exports to the U.S. Increase?" *The Diplomat*, July 7, 2023; Emily Rowland, "What the Proposed U.S. Ban on Russian Uranium Imports Could Mean for Kazakhstan," *The Times of Central Asia*, January 17, 2024. Owners and operators of U.S. civilian nuclear power reactors purchased 10.6 million pounds of uranium oxide or U₃O₈e (equivalent) from foreign suppliers in Kazakhstan during 2023, or roughly 21% of the total purchased by U.S. civilian nuclear power reactors for that year. See <https://www.eia.gov/uranium/marketing/table3.php>.

¹⁵⁹ "House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe Holds Hearing on Ending Russia Nuclear Energy Sector Dependence," *CQ Congressional Transcripts*, March 12, 2024.

Increased cooperation between the U.S. Geological Survey and Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan is one potential area for expanding engagement. Some experts suggest technology transfer and technical assistance as an area where the United States can potentially outcompete China as a partner for critical minerals development in Central Asia.¹⁶⁰ The C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue (CMD), announced following the September 2023 meeting between President Biden and his five Central Asian counterparts, held its first session in February 2024. The CMD, which is an outgrowth of the C5+1 diplomatic platform, seeks to “increase the region’s involvement in global critical minerals supply chains, strengthen economic cooperation, and advance the clean energy transition, while also protecting Central Asia’s unique ecosystems.”¹⁶¹ Congress could consider appropriating funding for the CMD and/or the Minerals Security Partnership with the aim of expanding cooperation with Kazakhstan. Expanded cooperation between the United States and Kazakhstan on critical minerals could potentially raise concerns about corruption, human rights, and environmental impacts.¹⁶²

Regional Connectivity

Promoting regional connectivity has long been a U.S. policy priority in Central Asia, and the United States has funded projects promoting regional cooperation in a range of areas. Since 2015, U.S. bilateral relationships in the region have been complemented by the C5+1 diplomatic platform, which provides a forum for the United States and the five Central Asian countries to address common challenges they face in areas such as security, economic connectivity, and environmental vulnerabilities.

Some analysts suggest that regional connectivity in Central Asia has taken on added significance in light of the war in Ukraine. In his March 2023 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Donald Lu stated that furthering regional connectivity would grant Central Asian countries “options that enable them to stand firm in the face of malign influence.”¹⁶³ For instance, in this view, greater regional connectivity could bolster Central Asia’s energy security and decrease its dependence on Russian natural gas, as well as facilitate trade via routes that bypass Russia. Congress could consider how Central Asian regional connectivity aligns with broader U.S. interests in light of the war, and how U.S. programs could support connectivity within Central Asia in a new geopolitical context. Congress could consider, for instance, whether to appropriate additional funding for the Biden Administration’s Economic Resilience in Central Asia (ERICEN) initiative in order to bolster connectivity within Central Asia.

¹⁶⁰ Edward Lemon and Bradley Jardine, “Central Asia Could Help the West Break Its Dependence on China’s Critical Minerals,” *The Hill*, January 29, 2024; Charley Ward, “The C5+1 Critical Mineral Dialogue: What It Means and How We Got Here,” Caspian Policy Center, February 23, 2024.

¹⁶¹ U.S. Department of State, “Inaugural C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue Among the United States and Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan,” February 9, 2024.

¹⁶² In a potentially relevant example, some Members of Congress expressed concern about a critical minerals agreement between the United States and Indonesia due to weak labor protections, a lack of environmental protections, Indonesia’s investment ties to China in the critical minerals sector, and other issues. See Senator Kevin Cramer, “Sen. Cramer, Colleagues Express Concerns Regarding Critical Minerals Trade Agreement with Indonesia,” October 25, 2023.

¹⁶³ “Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism Holds Hearing on Central Asia,” *CQ Congressional Transcripts*, March 8, 2023.

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