

## Kazakhstan And The Limit Of American Power

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When you represent the unipower, the essential nation, you rarely let a thought about other nations go unexpressed. So it is with the crisis in Kazakhstan, an authoritarian Central Asian state wracked by violence and now reliant on foreign troops.

The State Department has had plenty to say, but so far nothing helpful. For instance, department spokesman Ned Price condemned the violence, called for “restraint” on all sides, and urged “a peaceful resolution.” Moreover, he appealed “for all Kazakhstanis to respect and defend constitutional institutions, human rights, and media freedom, including through the restoration of internet service.”

In fact, there is little that Washington can do about Kazakhstan, which is as geographically distant and isolated as any country can be. American policymakers might better concentrate on practical problems, such as safeguarding U.S. diplomatic personnel and aiding U.S. citizens at risk.

Kazakhstan is one of five largely Muslim former Soviet republics clustered north of Afghanistan. All ended up as dictatorships, though Kazakhstan’s, still rated “not free” by Freedom House, has been a bit milder than the others—admittedly a low standard.

Geography, history, and ethnicity—nearly a quarter of the population is of Russian origin—draw the country toward Moscow. Geography and especially economics link Nur-Sultan to China. Kazakhstan, along with Armenia, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan, has joined Russia in the Eurasian Economic Union and Collective Security Treaty Organization (which also includes Tajikistan).

The Nur-Sultan government always sought to balance its foreign relationships and maintain a good relationship with the U.S. Last year the State Department declared: “In the years since Kazakhstan’s independence, the two countries have developed a strong and wide-ranging bilateral relationship and agreed on an enhanced strategic

partnership at a summit in January 2018.” Indeed, Nur-Sultan’s lagging human rights record did not forestall U.S. financial aid.

Since the start of protests on January 2, the Kazakh political system has tottered. In 2019 Nazarbayev, whose family grew rich while he was in office, stepped down in favor of his political heir, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. However, Nazarbayev took over the chairmanship of the security council, and security agencies remained largely loyal to him.

As the new year dawned the government cut fuel subsidies, triggering peaceful protests around the country. Soon more violent demonstrations erupted, as mobs attacked security personnel, patrolled city streets, occupied the Almaty airport, seized buildings, and set fires. Demands became more political, calling for the government’s resignation, Nazarbayev’s ouster, political reform, and a shift away from Russia.

The latest toll is 164 dead and roughly 6,000 arrested, many supposedly foreign nationals. Tokayev called the protestors “bandits and terrorists”; demonstrators also were variously labeled jihadists, criminals, unemployed and drunk young men, Nazarbayev backers, supporters of the “Kazakh Spring,” and even pro-U.S. “color revolution” plotters. Tokayev presented no evidence of a foreign conspiracy but requested assistance from the CSTO.

Led by Russia, organization members sent 2,500 troops. Moscow insisted that its forces would secure important facilities, such as the airport and Baikonur Cosmodrome, a space facility used by Russia, not suppress protests. Observers suspect Tokayev did not trust the Kazakh services, whose commanders he replaced. Relying on foreign nations for support demonstrated his government’s weakness even as he hoped to strengthen his position.

Having reestablished control over the streets—Tokayev issued a shoot to kill order—the political denouement remains to be seen. He seems safe from a popular overthrow and has attempted to consolidate his position by moving against Nazarbayev and the latter’s allies. For instance, Tokayev removed Nazarbayev from the security council, fired the Nazarbayev-appointed cabinet, and even arrested National Security Committee head (and former prime minister) Karim Massimov for “high treason.” Yet without a personal power base, Tokayev’s survival is anything but assured.

Of course, Kazakhstan should take a more democratic course, as was expected after Tokayev’s election. Unfortunately, he now is moving in reverse. In televised remarks he dismissed dialogue: “What negotiations could there be with criminals and murderers? We had to deal with armed and trained bandits and terrorists, both local and foreign. Therefore, they need to be destroyed, and this will be done in the near future.” Of course, this is how authoritarian governments typically confront popular unrest. Even economic sanctions would be unlikely to much affect his behavior.

The Biden administration is concerned over Moscow's intervention. Secretary of State Antony Blinken quipped that "one lesson in recent history is that once Russians are in your house, it's sometimes very difficult to get them to leave."

True enough, though that could be said of the U.S. as well. Washington forcibly occupies Guantanamo Bay in Cuba and roughly a third of Syria, which Congress never authorized, and threatened sanctions against Iraq after its legislators voted to send American forces home. The U.S. also intervened in domestic Japanese politics to preserve its bases in Okinawa, working to thwart, even oust, the elected Democratic Party. Washington also vigorously resisted America's ouster from Clark Air Field and Subic Bay Naval Base in the Philippines.

Moreover, it is difficult to criticize Putin's response to Tokayev's apparently unbidden request for assistance. As the University of Glasgow's Luca Anceschi observed, Tokayev "didn't choose Russia, he chose himself." Moreover, argued Chausovsky, Russia noted that "Signals from the United States and European Union indicated that there would not be significant economic or political blowback from the West." Indeed, in Kazakhstan, as in Armenia, where the Putin government helped broker a ceasefire, Russia could argue that its involvement helped end ongoing violence.

Still, National Defense University's Erica Marat contended that Moscow's intervention "is really about making Kazakhstan a more submissive, more loyal partner," and "more aligned with Russia against the West in geopolitical and global matters." The Atlantic Council's John Herbst, head of a sharply Russophobic program, insisted that "It's safe to assume that the CSTO decision was in fact Putin's decision." Plausible, and Putin set no departure date, explaining that his nation's troops would remain as long as Tokayev believed necessary.

However, the Russian president also indicated his nation's forces would be there only "for a limited time period." Moreover, nothing so far suggested that Moscow engineered the Kazakh meltdown or initiated the (very modest) intervention. Contended Eugene Chausovsky of the Newlines Institute: "Russia's intervention in Kazakhstan is unique compared with Moscow's previous military operations in the former Soviet space, such as in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014."

Most important, on Tuesday Tokayev told the Kazakh parliament that "The main mission of the CSTO peacekeeping forces has been successfully completed." He added: "In two days, a gradual withdrawal of the united CSTO peacekeeping contingent will begin. The process of the contingent withdrawal will take no more than 10 days." Which suggests Moscow will not maintain a long-term troop presence.

If Russia did stay longer than indicated, it might find its "victory" to be pyrrhic. The action's price would rise sharply if Moscow was forced to increase force levels or confront protestors. Moreover, observed Chausovsky, failure "to quell the situation and restore order in Kazakhstan—and potentially in future hot spots throughout the

CSTO—this could be badly damaging to the Kremlin’s own reputation, both at home and in the post-Soviet space.” Indeed, as a less wealthy power hampered by sanctions, Russia risks serious imperial overload when peripheral foreign commitments add economic drag.

Of course, even if not the operation’s purpose, at least some expanded Russian influence is the likely result since Putin is not known for his eleemosynary activities. Mukhtar Ablyazov, a former Nazarbayev official living in France and leader of the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, urged the West to act lest Kazakhstan “turn into Belarus and Putin will methodically impose his program—the recreation of a structure like the Soviet Union.” Ablyazov insisted: “The West should tear Kazakhstan away from Russia.”

Almost certainly he exaggerates the threat, and even if not by what means does he imagine the West “tearing away” Nur-Sultan? Anyway, Moscow’s involvement matters little to America because Kazakhstan matters little. Nur-Sultan has minimal security importance to the US, other than satisfying Washington’s conceit that everywhere on earth is vital to America. Kazakhstan is only a small US trading partner, 81st in the world. The country is energy and mineral rich, but Americans will still benefit if those resources are developed by others.

In fact, the most obvious loser from Moscow’s move is China. Russia’s hard power trumped the PRC’s economic and soft power. (Beijing politely responded with a statement that it supported “all efforts that help the Kazakhstan authorities to end the chaos as soon as possible.”)

Kazakhstan deserves better than dictatorship and violence. Unfortunately, last week’s political explosion made democracy more distant and strengthened Russia’s hand. However, Washington can do little to influence events. The U.S. should urge Nur-Sultan’s leaders to do all that is good and just. Then the administration should move on to more pressing issues.

Early in the crisis the State Department’s Price stated: “The United States is closely following the situation in Kazakhstan, a valued partner.” It should continue to do so, while saying little. Better for Washington to speak softly, occasionally, and thoughtfully, rather than simultaneously demonstrate its ignorance and impotence, as it has so often done in the past.

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