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Central Asia

Issue 10

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Foreword

In Central Asia, the concomitance of COP 29 held in Azerbaijan has led to an interrogation of the effects and impact of climate change. Its desertic conditions and limited water resources raised alarms about the long-term effects of climate change. The different countries are facing several political and economic choices necessary to ensure a smooth transition and avoid further conflicts on the use of resources.

Afghanistan, one of the most conflicted affected regions, is still in the process of receiving an international community and is facing several crises, among which the effects of climate change could severely impact the efforts of the community in rebuilding its economy.

Kazakhstan recently held a referendum on the choice of using nuclear energy. The country is still hosting a former Soviet nuclear facility with serious environmental consequences. The choice to pursue the construction of a new reactor could have several effects on the geopolitical stand of the country as well as on the population.

Moreover, Kazakhstan in the last month has approved a new Media Law limiting, the legislature's intentions and the foreign influence on the media sector. The law has the potential to severely limit the rights to access plural information for normal citizens introducing a new government control on them. The situation in a country could be easily reverted and follow the path of another former soviet republic with tighter control on the freedom of the press and opinion.

The recent BRICS meeting held in Russia was severely influenced by the current events unfolding in Ukraine. Their impact and implications for politics and economics in the overall Central Asia region are significant.

Kyrgyzstan, once considered the most democratic country in the region, is facing several political and economic challenges. Most of them are closely linked with the new geopolitical scenario facing the region and the way Kyrgystan will face those challenges will defy its future trajectory.

The articles in this edition highlight the economic, and political challenges faced by Central Asian countries, as well as the impact of climate change and examine the potential impact on its citizens.



Afghanistan's invitation to COP29 and the need for urgent climate action and cooperation

Lova Jansson

Key takeaways

- In response to escalating climate risks, Central Asian governments are increasingly taking action at the national level and through regional collaboration. The UN Climate Conferences, including the recent COP29 in Azerbaijan, have provided a platform for these countries to advance and amplify their partnership.
- On the other hand, Afghanistan, despite catastrophic climate change impacts on its population, and associated regional peace and security risks, is largely excluded from regional cooperation and global climate dialogue.
- Afghanistan's invitation to COP29 offers tentative hopes of positive change, though the major gap in climate financing for Afghanistan and other conflict-affected settings remains to be resolved.
- There is also a need for Central Asian cooperation to better address regional climate security issues and resilience for Afghan communities.

Climate change in Central Asia

- Climate change is a major threat to the countries of Central Asia, its regional impacts being both multifaceted and far-reaching. Temperatures in Central Asia are rising faster than the global average, with especially significant effects on already stretched water resources.[1]

The region's glacial surface area has shrunk by a third over the past 50 to 60 years, and the water volumes in the Syr Darya and Amu Darya basins are projected to drop by between 30 and 40 per cent by 2100.[2] Climate change-related disasters, including drought, heatwaves, floods, and landslides, are also set to become more frequent and severe in Central Asia. Central Asia is among the areas most at risk globally of armed conflict over water resources, and such risk will only scale with the impacts of climate change on rivers, seas, and glaciers. [3] Losses of productive outputs, as a result, because of climate change are expected to reach 6.5 per cent by 2060.[4] Relatedly, livelihoods will be challenged, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities will be sharpened. One estimate has it that Central Asia could produce 5 million internal climate migrants by 2050, having the potential to generate opportunities but also – if poorly handled – risks for migrants and host communities alike.[5] By increasing competition over natural resources and livelihoods and concentrating populations in certain locations, climate change then poses a critical threat to peace, human rights, and development in Central Asia.

Regional climate cooperation

The climate crisis received renewed global attention through the 29th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP29) in Baku, Azerbaijan, in November.

Central Asian countries, increasingly recognising the urgency of multi-level climate action, have been advancing green initiatives at home and making a notable mark at global and regional climate forums. At home, the Central Asian Five have strengthened their so-called National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Many are taking significant steps to reform their energy sectors and promote green solutions and supply chains [6], including by leveraging their major renewables potential and endowment of uranium and rare earth elements.[7] On top of such national initiatives, Central Asia is showcasing strong regional climate cooperation. At COP28 in 2023, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan adopted a Regional Climate Change Adaptation Strategy and associated action plan, setting out a path to stronger cooperation to limit harms from climate change by 2030.[8] Throughout 2024, the regional climate dialogue has only shown signs of strengthening, notably through the 6th Central Asia Climate Change Conference (CACCC) in May.[9]. Conference outcomes included an agreement on deepened and broadened climate cooperation, more ambitious contributions to the Paris Agreement, and the promotion of innovative climate finance mechanisms.[10] In addition, Kazakhstan is preparing to host a Regional Climate Summit in 2026; Kyrgyzstan is establishing a Regional Center for the Implementation of Energy-Efficient and Resource-Saving Technologies[11]; Turkmenistan is introducing a Regional Center for Climate Technologies; and Uzbekistan is setting up an International Climate Technology Expo Hub for the Aral Sea region.[12] Regional climate cooperation is serving several purposes for the Central Asian countries. First and foremost, it is a vehicle for more effective mitigation of and adaptation to climate change through more optimal use of national capacities, greater knowledge building, smarter decision-making, and more effective resource mobilisation.



Askhat Orazbay (Chairman of the Executive Committee of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea) and Zafar Makhmudov (Executive Director of the Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia) signing a Memorandum of Cooperation at the Central Asia Climate Change Conference in May 2024. Source: CAREC

Orchestrated regional action also helps Central Asia to integrate economically and politically into the international system, providing the region with a more prominent standing and an amplified voice in global dialogue. Economic diversification is a further critical co-benefit, which will assist the Central Asian countries in remaining resilient and prosperous in the decades to come. Finally, strengthening regional cooperation is critical for peace and stability in the face of heightened natural resource shortages and human mobility.[13]

Climate change and climate (in)action in Afghanistan

The elephant in the room of the increasingly well-composed Central Asian quintette is, however, Afghanistan. Since 2021, the conflict-torn country has been largely excluded both from global climate dialogue and financing and from regional cooperative efforts. This presents serious challenges to the Afghan population's ability to build climate resilience, the country's emissions trajectory, and regional stability. The impacts of climate change in Afghanistan are catastrophic.

The country ranks seventh on the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index of countries most vulnerable and least prepared to adapt to climate change.[14]

With the Afghan economy largely reliant on agriculture and shifts in rainfall producing detrimental effects on soils, crops and livestock, climate change is posing a grave threat to household incomes and food security. This comes in a context where 15 million Afghans are already facing emergency levels of food insecurity, and 3.2 million children under five are experiencing acute malnutrition.[15] Rapid-onset climate change-related disasters are also hitting Afghanistan with force: droughts, extreme temperatures and flash floods are increasingly common. 25 of 34 provinces – covering over half of the population – are now experiencing severe or catastrophic drought conditions.[16] Extreme events can displace entire communities who, with major prior vulnerabilities and without social safety nets, often must resort to inadequate shelters in highly hazard-prone locations. Natural disasters surpassed conflict as the primary driver of displacement in 2022, while the slow-onset effects of climate change contribute to rapid urbanisation, creating risks of local conflict.[17]



Flash flood impacts in Baghlan, Afghanistan, in May 2024. Source: The Associated Press

Despite acute exposure and vulnerability to climate change, climate action in Afghanistan has been limited. The country lacks the requisite internal expertise and capacity for climate action, with many specialists having fled and many women being prevented from using their professional post-2021 and the Taliban take-over.

Meanwhile, the de facto authorities have been pursuing damaging policies such as unabated coal mining.[18] A lack of climate mainstreaming in other policy areas is also breaking down community resilience. For example, increasing wheat growing in response to the ban on opium production poses a threat to water resources, and the destruction of cropland, fruit trees and irrigation systems as a means of persecution has reduced households' coping capacities.[19] At the same time, the international community has offered limited support to the Afghan population in the face of the climate crisis. Most development partners suspended support for Afghanistan in 2021, and funding to this day is almost exclusively geared toward meeting immediate humanitarian needs. Without international recognition of the de facto authorities, Afghanistan has also been almost completely disconnected from the global financial architecture – such as the major global climate funds – and multilateral platforms – notably the major UN Climate Conferences. This isolation poses a major risk of harm to the Afghan population. Neglecting climate action in Afghanistan not only deprives its communities of adaptive development but also exacerbates already extreme humanitarian suffering in the form of poverty, food insecurity, loss of life and displacement. Beyond this, a lack of climate action in Afghanistan increases the threat of regional conflict, both through unregulated cross-border migration and over-depleting water resources.[20] Tensions over water have been present for decades but have escalated in recent years, with occasional clashes between the Taliban and neighbouring countries' forces. Exclusion from regional agreements has provided the Taliban with an (illegitimate) excuse to shirk responsible behaviour. The construction of the Qosh Tepa canal in northern Afghanistan has challenged the region's existing water arrangement and could divert some 20 per cent of Amu Darya's reserves in the longer term, posing a threat to irrigation and drinking water supplies in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.[22]

Toward Afghan inclusion

Recognising this situation, humanitarian and development actors have been calling for a shift to the current approach. A UN Security Council report of late 2023 concluded that “the status quo of international engagement is not working”, recommending strengthened international cooperation on Afghan adaptation [23], and an assessment recommended a transition toward longer-term and developmental programming.[24] Afghan climate specialists, advocates, and voices of the previous government, meanwhile, have raised requests for climate change adaptation to be integrated into humanitarian and development programming [25] and for committed individuals from Afghan civil society and academia to be included in global negotiations. [26] In this context, the move by the COP29 Presidency to invite Afghanistan to Baku is tentatively promising. Just a day before the commencement of the major conference on 11 November, it was announced that a technical delegation from Afghanistan’s National Environment Protection Agency would travel to Baku, reportedly with observer status. The move was celebrated by the agency’s head, who called climate change a ‘humanitarian subject’ and said that the conference would be used to share Afghanistan’s needs with the global community and strengthen climate cooperation. [27]

The hesitancy among the international community about Afghanistan’s invitation is not difficult to grasp, given the Taliban’s track record of grave human rights violations. Nonetheless, it is a pragmatic and potentially constructive step. Leaving the Afghan population at the coalface of unmanaged climate change to defy moral obligations. For example, women – the major victims of the Taliban’s rule – face some of the worst consequences of the climate crisis, being vulnerable to worsening water shortages and disasters in their roles in water collection and domestic caretaking.[28]

Their rights are not served by the international community turning its back, but they demand urgent climate action at the national and local levels. Whether such action ensues from Afghanistan’s presence at COP29 remains to be seen and ought to be carefully monitored. Critically, climate dialogue, financing and action must first and foremost engage and target Afghanistan’s most climate-vulnerable communities. International actors need to pursue ways of channelling support directly to these legitimate beneficiaries, working with civil society and local representatives while carefully managing security risks.

Unfortunately, Afghanistan is not the only country where conflict, fragility and illegitimate governance have weakened climate financing and action. The World Bank’s Closing the Gap report shows that in 2020, fragile- and conflict-affected countries received only some two-thirds of the adaptation finance provided to other low-income countries – or half, in the case of high-intensity conflict settings.[29] Different approaches are urgently needed for these contexts, including innovative and strategic programming by humanitarian and development actors that integrates climate change resilience building and sustainability measures with the humanitarian and peace-promoting action still palatable to international donors.[30]

Conclusion

In the case of Afghanistan, part of the solution, while delicate, also consists of stronger regional cooperation that promotes both climate resilience and security. Central Asia cannot achieve effective management of transboundary natural resources and flows in the longer term without considering the needs of the Afghan population and engaging in constructive dialogue with Kabul.

The alternative is likely to make both water and other regional issues harder to resolve and could cause quick destabilisation. Some promising steps have been taken, such as the Regional Conference of Youth and Children on Climate Change in Central Asia and Afghanistan, held in September 2024, and strategically leveraging the power of non-governmental actors and the younger generation.[31]

Afghanistan is also a member of the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program, which set a vision for regional climate change action in late 2023. This vision encompasses mitigation, adaptation, and cross-border cooperation [32] but is less advanced than many agreements between smaller regional country groupings.[33] Nonetheless, the current momentum of regional cooperation and the urgency of the climate crisis makes now an opportune time to ensure that Central Asian climate action continues to become more inclusive and peace-promoting.



Participants at the Regional Conference of Youth and Children on Climate Change in Central Asia and Afghanistan in September 2024. (Source: UNDP Kyrgyzstan.)

Recommendations:

- Governments in Central Asia should continue to deepen and expand joint regional knowledge building, dialogue, advocacy, and action on climate change. In doing so, they should carefully consider the devastating and potentially destabilising impacts of climate change on Afghanistan, support Afghan resilience building, and seek constructive engagement with Kabul.
- The international community should monitor the impacts of including Afghanistan at COP29, ensuring no harm and promoting steps toward both peace and resilience building at the national level.
- It should also urgently increase financing for climate action in Afghanistan and other conflict-affected and fragile settings and advance innovative humanitarian and development solutions that integrate climate resilience and peacebuilding. Critically, climate financing and action must reach the most vulnerable, including women, especially in Afghanistan.

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Nuclear Power in Kazakhstan: A solution or a problem?

Tara Matthews

Key takeaways

- On the 6th of October 2024, Kazakhstan voted in favour of the construction of a nuclear power plant in a nationwide referendum.
- The idea of constructing a nuclear power plant in Kazakhstan has been in discussion for several years and has been proposed as a means to solve energy and environmental crises faced by the country.
- Despite being a cleaner energy source, the construction of a nuclear power plant poses significant environmental risks both in general and in the specific context of Kazakhstan.
- Nuclear power will not serve as an immediate relief to Kazakhstan's energy security issues.
- The lead-up to the referendum has been mired in democratic issues, and how the project unfolds could further negatively impact public trust, potentially leading to domestic instability.
- Russia will likely be chosen as an international partner for the project. However, choosing Russia risks endangering the project's success, Kazakhstan's sovereignty and its geopolitical standing.

Introduction

On the 6th of October 2024, Kazakh citizens, in a nationwide referendum, were asked the question, "Do you agree with the construction of a nuclear power plant in Kazakhstan?". An alleged 64% of registered voters turned out for the referendum [1], resulting in a 73% vote share [2] in favour of constructing a nuclear power plant (NPP) in the country.

For now, it is unclear how the project will progress, with speculation over which country will serve as a needed international partner for the plant's construction and when construction will begin. However, at least for the time being, it is intended that the plan will go ahead. The renewal of nuclear power generation has been in discussion in Kazakhstan for several years now. [3] The government has highlighted several benefits of nuclear power for the country: in light of electricity shortages in recent winters in the country, nuclear power is proposed as a way to plug the energy gap. [4] A transition to nuclear power is also a means for the country to move away from its heavy reliance on fossil fuels and reduce air pollution, both significant issues in the country. [5]



Kazakhstan nuclear referendum. (Source Wikipedia. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2024_Kazakh_nuclear_power_referendum.jpg)

Although valid arguments, the referendum and the subject of the construction of an NPP have faced significant backlash and opposition from the public, creating a significant amount of discourse and drawing media attention across the globe. These debates have highlighted that the issue of nuclear power in Kazakhstan is multifaceted. Although, especially in the government's eyes, it may be part of the answer to solving genuine issues faced by the country,

There is also evidence to suggest that it may also create or exacerbate other problems, particularly if the authorities do not proceed with caution. In addition to dealing with negative public opinion, the Kazakh government will need to be mindful of the risks of endangering the country's environmental and energy security in other aspects, domestic peace and stability, as well as the public's trust in the government; its national sovereignty, security and standing in the international community. This article will discuss these three key areas in which Kazakhstan must take care if it is to pursue its plans of building an NPP, thereby highlighting the complexity of this matter for the country and the potential threats to the nation's peace and security.

Kazakh government's position on nuclear power: environment & energy security

Two of the main arguments put forward by the Kazakh government to promote the construction of an NPP have been the aims of reducing the country's reliance on fossil fuels and improving its air quality. Despite being the world's largest producer of uranium [6] and its significant oil and gas reserves, [7] Kazakhstan relies primarily on coal-burning power plants for energy production, with over 60% of its total energy production coming from coal in 2022. [8] Kazakhstan also has high levels of air pollution, with nationwide exposure being 4 times the World Health Organisation recommended levels. [9] 13,000 deaths in 2021 were attributed to poor air quality and pollution impacts on other public health issues, too. [10]

Kazakhstan is pledged to several international climate agreements [11], and its commitment to transitioning towards being a green, sustainable world leader is enshrined in Kazakh domestic law. [12] At COP29, held in Baku, Azerbaijan, in November, Kazakhstan also signed up to several deals showing its commitment to transitioning to green energy. [13]

Nuclear power is no more polluting than wind or solar energy [14] therefore, introducing nuclear power is not an invalid option for resolving the country's issues nuclear power is not without other environmental risks [15], and fossil fuel reliance and air pollution are not the only environmental issues faced by Kazakhstan. Water security continues to be an ongoing issue in the whole Central Asia region [16], and Kazakhstan has already seen the impact of aquatic environmental degradation in its history with the catastrophic Aral Sea disaster. [17] Water pollution is another issue. [18] The proposed site of the NPP, the village of Ulken, sits on the shores of Lake Balkhash. Lake Balkhash would serve as the water source for the NPP, and water used from the plant would be pumped back into the lake. Lake Balkhash has already been the site of significant environmental issues, with water levels in the lake decreasing, and there are concerns that the water pumped back into the lake, which would be at a higher temperature, would disrupt the ecosystem of the water. [19] Ecosystem damage is another broader issue, often brought on by the country's many heavy industries. [20] Although nuclear energy itself is clean, the process of mining uranium is very energy intensive and potentially polluting, and the net benefits of switching to nuclear are unlikely to be sustainable in the long run. [21] Although the NPP would, in part, help to solve the issue of Kazakhstan's air quality and fossil fuel reliance, it is likely to run the risk of worsening other environmental issues.



Kazakhstan nuclear reactor control room. (Source: <https://www.nnc.kz/media/news/medium/gZnRIhmhiV.jpg>)

Another argument for the building of an NPP has been due to ongoing electricity shortages [22], which Kazakhstan has faced in recent winters, largely due to crumbling Soviet-era energy infrastructure. [23] These have demonstrated a need for Kazakhstan to overhaul its energy networks. However, the proposed NPP would only be capable of generating 5% [24] of the country's total energy needs, so it is not a catch-all solution to improving Kazakhstan's energy infrastructure. Furthermore, construction of an NPP would take a significant amount of time, and it does not appear that construction will begin anytime soon [25], meaning that this is not a quick fix to the country's energy crisis. If the NPP project does go ahead, it will be only part of the solution to solve Kazakhstan's environmental and energy issues and the broader consequences on security in both of these fields. It also has the potential to impact negatively on both of these if not handled with care and in line with other sustainability and energy security strategies and projects.

Democratic issue: Domestic stability & public trust

The freedom and fairness of the nuclear power referendum have come under significant scrutiny. Multiple anti-nuclear activists were arrested, detained or fined in the lead-up to the vote [26], and a local newspaper was fined for conducting an "illegal" opinion poll on the topic. [27] Protests related to the topic were also banned. [28] A lack of balanced information, not allowing members of the public to make an informed decision on their vote, was another factor in drawing criticism to the process of the vote. Although the government attempted to engage the public in a series of nationwide "public debates", these were criticised for being one-sided and not offering a platform for genuine open dialogue. [29] State-owned media coverage was criticised for only positively or neutrally discussing the topic. [30] The referendum itself was mired with reports of ballot stuffing and discrepancies between voter turnout and anecdotal reports of actual turnout. [31]

Some commentators noted that whether the construction of an NPP would go ahead or not was already a foregone conclusion decided by the government and that the referendum had merely been for show. [32] All this calls into question the legitimacy of the vote in a country which already has a poor democratic record. Kazakhstan is rated as a 'not free' country and as a consolidated authoritarian regime by Freedom House. [33] The matter of the freedom and fairness of the NPP referendum is something that the Kazakh authorities need not only be concerned about due to how it may impact their rating on international rankings. Democratic malpractice has in the past sparked significant domestic protest and unrest. As noted by Bruce Pannier [34], The 2022 Bloody January protests in the country were caused by feelings that the government was not listening to people's wishes. Other significant protests have been sparked by similar issues. [35] In addition to more general arguments often held against nuclear power, Kazakhstan's nuclear history has led Kazakh citizens to have particularly strong and emotive opposition to the matter. From 1949-1989, Kazakhstan was the location of the Semipalatinsk Test Site, where the Soviet Union conducted nuclear weapons testing. [36] These tests caused significant public health and environmental damage, and the country is still feeling their effects to this day. [37] The strength of national feelings towards nuclear issues could lead the topic to be a sparking point for the scale of backlash seen in 2022. Given that the construction of an NPP and its subsequent operation are long-term matters, it is also unlikely to be an issue that disappears quickly. Another reason for pushback from the public has been caused by a lack of trust in the Kazakh authorities to safely and legitimately carry out the construction, maintenance and operation of an NPP [38], as well as to safely dispose of nuclear waste resulting from the plant's operation. [39] Corruption plays a huge role in this. Kazakhstan scores poorly on global corruption indices such as Transparency International, where it scores 39 out of 100. [40]



Source: [Theecologist.org \(https://theecologist.org/sites/default/files/styles/facebook/public/NG_media/382872.jpg?itok=LYDbas9D\)](https://theecologist.org/sites/default/files/styles/facebook/public/NG_media/382872.jpg?itok=LYDbas9D)

Large-scale infrastructure projects such as this carry a significant corruption risk. [41] Safety is also paramount in the construction, maintenance and operation of an NPP, and corruption leads to the risk of oversight in these areas. [42] In the long run, if anything were to go wrong, this could further worsen the already poor public trust in government and again may lead to political instability or social unrest. This project presents both a huge opportunity and challenge for the Kazakh government to show itself as a trustworthy institution. As it proceeds, it should keep in mind public opinion and avoid worsening already existing issues around democracy and corruption in the country to maintain domestic peace and stability.

Geopolitical dynamics

For some of those critical of the construction of an NPP in Kazakhstan, there is one factor that raises the most concern - Russia. There are currently four countries and their national energy companies which could serve as potential partners for the construction of the nuclear power plant - Japan, South Korea, France and Russia. [43] Although in a speech following the referendum, President Tokayev stated that an 'international consortium' would be best positioned to lead the construction of the plant in Kazakhstan and that careful consideration would be given to selecting partners [44], there is a consensus and suspicion that the contractor for the NPP is already a foregone conclusion and will be

Rosatom - Russia's state-owned nuclear corporation.[45] This poses several potential risks. Firstly, its potential impacts on the efficiency and feasibility of the project. Rosatom is currently contracted to build nuclear reactors in several countries, including Hungary, Turkey, Egypt, China and Bangladesh. However, construction in Turkey and Egypt has been delayed due to international sanctions faced by Russia. Russia still relies on Western companies to supply some of the technology and parts needed for the construction of nuclear reactors. [46] Although Rosatom itself is not under international sanctions, some of its subsidiaries are, meaning these parts cannot be exported from the West. There are also increasing pressures from the West to sanction Rosatom [47], meaning that in the future, this issue could worsen. Rosatom has also been scrutinised for safety issues in the past. [48] Partnering with Russia on the project runs the risk that the project will not be completed either safely or efficiently, which would negate the benefits of the project outlined by its supporters. Secondly, the matter of Kazakh-Russian relations since the beginning of the war in Ukraine is not black and white, but multiple commentators have observed efforts of Kazakhstan to distance itself from Russia and increase its sovereignty from a country with which it has historically been extremely intertwined, economically and from a security perspective. [49]



Inside Kazakhstan power plant. Source: The Caspian News. (Source:https://caspiannews.com/media/caspian_news/all_original_photos/1504684732_6227489_1504684654_49665881028634910.jpg)

Although not a rhetoric widely touted, certain members of Russia's government have previously hinted at the idea that "Kazakhstan is next" [50] and such a significant project on Kazakhstan's territory could risk the integrity of their borders and sovereignty. These fears also resonate with the public. There are fears that choosing Russia as a partner for the project would further entangle Kazakhstan with its neighbour and increase the country's dependence on it. Russia already controls 79% of Kazakhstan's crude oil exports and 25% of its uranium production and supplies the country with electricity. [51] Trade between the two countries totalled 27 billion USD in 2023. [52] This is sure to be a long-term project, and therefore, any foreign involvement would not be easy to walk away from. It is also one that potentially risks Kazakhstan's sovereignty and borders. There is also the aspect of Kazakhstan's international standing in partnering with Russia for the project. Kazakhstan currently has a high standing with the international nuclear community [53] and, in general, is a country looking to engage with the wider world. Particularly in the context of the Russian occupation of the Zaporizhzhia Power Plant in Ukraine and its attacks on other nuclear sites in the country, collaboration with Rosatom could jeopardise Kazakhstan's global standings in terms of nuclear cooperation. Rosatom now de facto runs Zaporizhzhia, and there have been safety concerns as well as human rights abuses reported within the plant. [54] Rosatom is also connected to the Russian government and is seen as part of Russia's war machine. [55] Kazakhstan risks its other global economic and security ambitions if it engages with Russia on this project.

Conclusion

Public opposition to the construction of nuclear power plants is not a phenomenon unique to Kazakhstan, and nuclear energy comes with its advantages and disadvantages. Presuming that Kazakhstan proceeds with the building of an NPP following its referendum, there are numerous issues the Kazakh government must contend with to ensure that the project runs smoothly and does not risk endangering the country's stability or security in various dimensions. Kazakhstan must think holistically about the matter, ensuring to balance opinions of the public and the international community and achieving its own goals.

Recommendations:

- Kazakhstan should look holistically at environmental and sustainability issues in the country and consider the long-term effects of nuclear power. It should look at developing other alternative, clean energy sources to improve both its sustainability and solve its energy crises.
- Assuming Kazakhstan moves forward with the project, it should engage in public education projects and heightened transparency around the project to engage public trust. It may also benefit from the involvement of an external international regulator to oversee the project and avoid corruption.
- Kazakhstan should carefully consider its choice of partner in the construction of the power plant and should pursue its initial statement of pursuing an 'international consortium' to ensure the legitimacy, safety and efficiency of the project, protect its sovereignty and territorial security and maintain its high international standing in the nuclear sphere.

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2024 mass media law in Kazakhstan: The issues of press freedom and information access

Natalia Arkhipova

Key takeaways

- Under the 2024 Mass Media Law, an expanded definition of the term "mass media" brings online platforms and digital content creators under firm regulation. This turn of events has come to cast serious doubt on questions of censorship and suppression of freedom of expression.
- The law reportedly attempts to promote Kazakh identity by diminishing the allowable percentage of foreign content on domestic media from 20 per cent to 10 per cent, though at the possible expense of narrowing the scope of public access to a wide array of international viewpoints.
- The law has formed part of a regional trend in Central Asia where media regulation is being implemented to combat misinformation but often forms part of the mechanism to strengthen state control and repress voices.

Historical context: Press freedom in Kazakhstan

The "Law on the Press and Other Mass Media" of 1991 was one of the first legal acts adopted by Kazakhstan as they gained independence. This was a notable signifier of their first steps on the new, democratic route of development. [1] The 1991 law declared freedom of speech and the press, guaranteeing that journalists had the right to freely seek, receive and disseminate information.

It forbade any form of censorship and thus provided a framework within which an independent media environment could be established. [2] In due course, the amendments to this law changed, sometimes mirroring the ever-changing political weather, particularly a gradual erosion of the freedoms which it had sought to protect. Particularly a gradual erosion of the freedoms which it had sought to protect. For example, in 2001, President Nursultan Nazarbayev approved restrictive amendments to the Mass Media Law, with such amendments expanding on the definition of "mass media" to include websites. Doing so subjected "websites" to the same strict regulations placed on traditional media outlets. [3] Consequently, Kazakhstan found itself consistently ranked low in notable press freedom indices. It would be amiss not to acknowledge what improvements Kazakhstan have made in the past decade. For one, they have moved from 160th place in 2013-2014 to peaking in 2022 at 122nd. [4]



A cameraman from the "TV & Radio Team of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan" films during the German-Kazakh Economic Forum, Astana, Kazakhstan, June 20, 2023. . (source: Jens B'ttner, AP Photo)

These accomplishments have been offset by Reporters Without Borders' 2024 Global Press Freedom Index – wherein they placed Kazakhstan at 142nd out of 180 countries. [5] The backsliding ranking shift is indicative of the increasing implementation of barriers to Kazakhstan's media independence. Such barriers include more government control over narratives, the harassment of journalists, and the all-around lack of robust protections for any sort of freedom of expression. This is well illustrated, for instance, by the increasing attacks on media workers in the recent past. Between 2022 and 2023, at least 838 cases of attacks/threats against professional and citizen media workers, activists of traditional and online media outlets, and editorial offices were documented by the Justice for Journalists Foundation. [6] The changes, which had been made since 1999 when the law on "Mass Media" was adopted, underwent significant changes – and not necessarily for the better. [7] The past quarter-century has reflected how systematic issues have led to Kazakhstan's hindrance towards a free and independent press, where, instead of amendments focussed on adapting outdated legislation to the present, Kazakh lawmakers are focussed more on creating an entirely new law on "Mass Media" that better suits their needs and the current "realities" of the media environment. [8]

The 2024 Mass Media Law

In June 2024, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev signed the new "Mass Media Law" into effect. With the implementation came a signifier of the new approach to media regulations in Kazakhstan. [9] Elements of the new law have sparked anxiety amongst press freedom advocates. They caution that the revisions and the new law may result in more state control over the media, [10] with changes targeted at affection content diversity, foreign influence, and general, overall government oversight of the content produced. [11]



Expanded session of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2021. (source: Akorda, the office of the President of Kazakhstan)

Some of the clauses introduced in the new law raised a controversy in the society. Among these, the most notable ones are related to the limitations of foreign content and the government oversight of the content created and shared. Reduction in Foreign Content: Here, the law decreases the amount of foreign television and radio programs that domestic channels are allowed from 20% to 10%. Arguably, this could limit the diversity of information and other perspectives available to the public. [12]



Zhaniya Urankayeva, a journalist for the Press.kz outlet, had her credentials revoked for reportedly violating the recently introduced rules that restrict journalists' access to top government officials. (Source: Urankayeva's Facebook page)

Enhanced Government Oversight: The revisions grant Kazakh authorities expanded powers to monitor media content for any materials they deem to be harmful to the perceived societal standard morals or any national values. Because their criterion is broad, fears have been raised of increasing censorship and suppression of dissenting voices. [13]

The 2024 law expands upon what can be defined as “mass media”. Traditional outlets – newspapers, television and radio – are now accompanied by online platforms and internet resources. [14] Including digital media means that any online content creators, bloggers, and independent news websites are now subjected to similar oversight and control. Thus, these publications are now forced to register with a government body and to have a physical presence within Kazakhstan. [15] Press freedom advocates argue this may all lead to increased censorship, hinder the free flow of online information [16], and, ultimately, limit freedom of expression – a fundamental human right. [17] [18] With this law in force, authorities were empowered to control all media to ensure it did not violate the national legislation and was in line with undefined “national, cultural, and family values.” This ambiguity has resulted in many allegations that such rules allow arbitrary application and self-censorship on the part of journalists and content publishers. [19] In all, the new Kazakhstani law makes an unwieldy expanse of internet resources fit into the definition of “mass media”, thereby representing a serious turn in media regulation. This extension of government oversight into the digital environment raises some very important questions regarding the future of press freedom and access to information in Kazakhstan.

Positive impact and negative implications for press freedom

The reception of the 2024 Mass Media Law of Kazakhstan has been mixed. The advocates hail potential benefits, while the critics raise the alarm over implications for press freedom. [20] [21] Supporters argue that the law instituted more transparent regulations on the operation of the mass media.

Thus, it would improve journalistic standards and accountability. Because of the definition of “mass media” as included in online sites, the legislation aims to address issues created by digital misinformation and make the information environment more responsible. Moreover, the focus of the law on increasing domestic content, especially in the Kazakh language, can be estimated as one more way of preserving national culture and identity. [22] On the other hand, many scholars and international organisations claim that this law may curtail the freedom of the press: with such an expanded definition of mass media to include online resources, digital content creators are now under harsh regulation. Thus possibly gagging independent journalism and voices of dissent. Moreover, the obligation of media outlets to register and maintain a physical presence in Kazakhstan may place an inordinate level of burdens on smaller, independent entities – therefore leading to self-censorship or closure. [23]

Regional and international context

The role of the media in Central Asia is not only to provide a platform for political projects but also a tool for the state to control, and it is highly varied across the region. Turkmenistan represents extreme censorship, while Kyrgyzstan represents a case of relative pluralism. [24] The complex media landscape of the region has so far not been overcome despite efforts at independent national media policies related to building up national cohesion. The main challenges are an increase in dependence on digital platforms and a strong presence of Russian language media, which complicates attempts at gaining independence in the field of media. [25][26] Press freedom in Kazakhstan is noticeably curbed, even when juxtaposed against the media environments of its Central Asian neighbours.

For example, while Kyrgyzstan has made significant strides toward improvements, by comparison, Kazakhstan's media environment remains heavily controlled. [27] In any case, one may also support an argument that Kazakhstan's new media law is just a reflection of the regional trend where Central Asian countries enact laws that hamper media freedom under various cloaks of combating misinformation and protecting national interests. [28] This is a regional trend pointing to a common desire of Central Asian governments to maintain political stability and not cede any space in public discourse. However, this comes at the cost of suppressing voices of dissent and independent journalism. All these trends have manifested themselves in Kazakhstan through increased scrutiny of traditional and digital media tactics, which have also been emulated in the neighbouring countries of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.[29] However, reliance on Russian-language media across the region adds another layer of complexity since Russian media outlets stand out and remain popular in many areas. This sets public opinion and cultural discourses, especially among the older, bilingual audience. [30] That hardy resilience forms a jarring juxtaposition with the steady trend of digital platforms among the youth. Digital platforms have proved to be less controllable, and their weaponisation through the dissemination of misinformation and illiberal ideology has also been undertaken. The media landscape in Kazakhstan and its neighbours reflects a sensitive and ever-balancing situation between the need to foster the state's narratives and addressing the challenges of globalisation and digital connectivity. [31] On the issue of participation in the international arena, Kazakhstan has signed both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, both of which guarantee the right to freedom of expression and access to information. [32][33]

Moreover, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression has always explained that rules on media should not be designed in a manner to unduly deny such rights. [34] Other European bodies, including the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), have criticised Kazakhstan's limitations on the media. [35] The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media has already called on Kazakhstan to bring its media policy into line with international standards, warning that such vaguely worded provisions in laws, such as the 2024 Mass Media Law, are leading to arbitrary enforcement. [36] Those statements by international organisations mean that there is a more general global accord that, though fighting misinformation and protecting national interests are noble and justifiable goals, they shall not be at the expense of fundamental human rights. In other words, Kazakhstan's media regulations, especially in their effect on digital platforms, are under scrutiny as a test of the country's commitment to upholding international norms with respect for an open democratic society.

Conclusion

Kazakhstan government's approach to regulating media via the 2024 Mass Media Law of Kazakhstan. It carries both the context of modern challenges faced in the information era and the perennial struggle for free press. On the one hand, it is expected to bring clearer guidelines on the operation of media outlets, emphasising the promotion of national identity. On the other hand, restrictive provisions on foreign content, coupled with the enlarged role of government oversight, have brought about well-founded concerns over the consolidating trends of censorship and limiting freedom of expression.

The law itself is part of a larger regional pattern across Central Asia: governments have been passing tighter media legislation under the guise of fighting misinformation and protecting national values; such measures usually come at the cost of independent journalism and diverse public discourse, exposing a preference for political stability over open dialogue. As Kazakhstan's media environment continues to change, it remains a tightrope walk in cultivating state narratives while embracing a freer press—one moving these stakeholders in a critical direction toward balanced policies that protect fundamental human rights while engaging with the issues of digital misinformation and cultural preservation. The adoption of the 2024 Mass Media Law has underlined the continuing tension in Kazakhstan's path toward reconciliation between government authority and the precepts of an open and inclusive society. Whether this will help buttress the resilience of the country against digital misinformation or throttle its already tenuous press freedoms remains to be seen. After all, its implementation and impact on access to information will prove to be a critical litmus test for Kazakhstan's respect for democratic norms and human rights in the years ahead.

- **Ease Registration Burdens on Digital Media:** Lighten the registration burden on small and independent digital media outlets so that they may be operated with incentives, thereby reducing the possibility of self-censorship. It is a very significant step toward ensuring an all-inclusive, diverse media landscape.
- **Re-evaluating Content Quotas:** Foreign media quotas require re-evaluation to allow for higher levels of foreign content. The people are looking for some kind of assurance concerning accessing more international views in a world of information sharing where the entire globe is becoming more like a small village day by day.
- **Conform to international norms:** It should also actively cooperate with international organisations, like the OSCE, in bringing its regulations into conformity with international standards on media. That would go a long way in solidifying commitments by this country to press freedom and openness, hence showing will in the democratic principles in the media space.

Recommendations:

- **Clarify oversight criteria:** Kazakhstan should revise the 2024 Mass Media Law to explicitly define such terms as "national values" and "societal morals." This would minimise the possibility of arbitrary application and alleviate concerns over the possible abuse of regulatory power in invoking censorship.

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BRICS and Central Asia: The responsibility to protect amid Russia's aggression

Tuck Kei Yong

Key takeaways

- Russia's reinvigorating efforts of the BRICS partnership reveal a deeper intention to bypass international sanctions by Western States.
- Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are sandwiched between the need to maintain diplomatic ties with Russia and the overall regional stability in Central Asia despite ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine.
- Through the foreign policies of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, both States emphasised the responsibility to protect and uphold international law.

Introduction

With the 16th BRICS summit concluding on 24 October 2024 and its inclusion of another 13 partner States, Central Asia's geopolitical dynamics and intersection with the BRICS grouping have become increasingly critical in the context of international peace, security, and human rights.



PBRICS+ held its 16th annual summit at Kazan, Russia from 22 to 24 October 2024. (BRICS, 24 October 2024)

Notably, following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, [1] Russia has sought to leverage its alliances within BRICS and the broader BRICS+ framework to bypass the extensive economic sanctions imposed by the West and to continue its military operations with minimal international repercussions. [2] This dire situation is particularly relevant to all Member States in Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan [3] and Uzbekistan, [4] as their status among the 13 partner States of BRICS meant that they face the challenge of balancing their diplomatic ties with Russia while maintaining sovereignty and regional stability in the face of growing Russian aggression.

As partner members of the BRICS+ network, [5] these Central Asian States find themselves in an increasingly delicate diplomatic position. Both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan must navigate their relationships with Russia, an aggressor in its international armed conflict against Ukraine, while also adhering to their international obligation concerning the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). The latter emphasises the need for all member States' obligation to intervene whenever a State fails to protect its population from atrocities, such as genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and crimes of aggression. [6] Despite the geopolitical weight of Russia in Central Asia, both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have demonstrated differing approaches in balancing sovereignty, international peace and security, and non-coercive diplomacy. [7]

Russia's Aggression in Ukraine and the Role of BRICS in Circumventing Sanctions

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 posed a significant geopolitical crisis and prompted the need for a global response. To date, the United States, and the European Union, alongside more than 30 allies and partners, responded with comprehensive sanctions aimed at crippling Russia's economy, isolating it from the global financial system, and deterring further military aggression. [8] These sanctions targeted Russian banks, trade, energy exports, and political elites, with the overarching aim to compel Russia to cease its crime of aggression against Ukraine. [9] Notably, the oil sanction on Russia's price cap limited the overall earnings Russia could receive for its oil exports, leaving Russian oil refineries with insurmountable financial losses amidst declining overall exports, high production costs and soaring interest rates. [10] Through coordinated sanctions, the coalition of Western member States and its allies seized approximately \$300 billion in Russian central bank assets, amounting to about half of Russia's foreign reserves. [11] With more than \$200 billion frozen in European accounts since July 2024, the European Union have already begun transferring portions of these immobilised Russian assets to support and expedite the recovery process of a war-torn Ukraine. [12] However, these sanctions failed to isolate Russia completely. Instead, the International Monetary Fund, in its October 2024 World Economic Outlook Report, predicted a 3.6 per cent increase in Russia's gross domestic product (GDP) forecast for 2024. [13] Not only was Russia's forecasted GDP 0.6 per cent more than the previous forecast made in April 2024, but it remained relatively higher than most of its Western counterparts. Similarly, in its latest October 2024 report, the World Bank also forecasted Russia's GDP to grow 3.2% in 2024 and 1.6% in 2025, representing a 0.3 and 0.2% increase in 2024 and 2025, respectively, compared to its June figures. [14]

Whilst the GDP forecast does not accurately reflect all aspects of a member State's economic health, it does suggest that the international sanctions intended to cripple Russia's mechanisms for financing its war has largely failed to meet its mark. With the Russia-Ukraine international armed conflict raging on, coupled with a 25 per cent increase in Russia's military expenditure, [15] the upturn in Russia's GDP forecast likely reveals a cold but simple harsh truth - Russia has other means to finance its military campaigns.



Russian President Vladimir Putin addressed the BRICS Parliamentary Forum in St. Petersburg, Russia. (Source: Valery Sharifulin/ Sputnik, 11 July 2024)

To understand the importance of BRICS in this context and why Central Asia could play a role in Russia's ongoing offences, we turn to similar examples within BRICS. As a core member of BRICS, Russia relied on its relationships with other BRICS and BRICS+ countries, including China, India, and South Africa, to mitigate most of the economic damage incurred since the 2022 sanctions. [16] According to a BRICS report, in 2023, Russia exported 78 per cent of its oil to China and India, representing a 46 per cent compared to 2021. [17] In turn, China and India increased their oil exports to Europe from 12 million tonnes to 36 million tonnes, most of which are likely sanctioned oil from Russia. [18] By leaning on China, its largest partner in the BRICS framework, Russia can bypass sanctions by increasing overall trade in terms of energy and raw materials.

Similarly, on 17 September 2024, news media reported that India will continue to purchase discounted Russian oil to meet its energy demands despite being fully aware of Russia's crimes of aggression against Ukraine. [19] Thus, BRICS ensured that the Russian economy remained operational despite the weight of Western sanctions. Beyond the initially envisaged economic relations, Russia also sought to strengthen its geopolitical ties within BRICS and its allies. By committing itself to position the BRICS grouping as a 'more representative, fairer international order, a reinvigorated and reformed multilateral system', BRICS seeks to challenge Western economic and political dominance on a global scale. [20] Ultimately, from Russia's perspective, the BRICS+ group represents the coalition that could either abstain from or oppose measures of international accountability for its actions in Ukraine by circumventing international isolation and avoiding sanctions. With the BRICS grouping already dominating 31.5 per cent of the global economy in 2023 [21] and 80 per cent of the global oil production in 2024, [22] it is clear that a grim future is not far off. [23] In the face of these pressures, Russia's continued reliance on BRICS member States served as its critical strategy for bolstering its political and economic resilience. However, the question of R2P remains central to these developments, [24] especially as Russia's crimes of aggression, alongside other alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity, such as acts of torture, ill-treatment, and gender-based violence against the civilian population, [25] demand a stronger response from the international community. Within this context, member States like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have found themselves uncomfortably balancing their economic and political ties to Russia with their national obligation to promote peace, security, and adherence to international law.

Kazakhstan's rejection of Russian influence and diplomatic leadership

Kazakhstan has long since maintained close economic, political, and cultural connections with Russia. As the largest country in Central Asia, [34] Kazakhstan shares extensive borders with Russia and has historically maintained close cooperation in the trade, energy, and defence sectors. Kazakhstan's economic dependence on Russia, particularly its energy exports, made it vulnerable to any rupture in ties with Moscow. In January 2024, exports from Kazakhstan to Russia amounted to 10.7 per cent of its total exports (approx. \$631.37 million), while imports from Russia to Kazakhstan amounted to 26.1 per cent of its total imports (approx. \$1090.82 million). [35] Amongst the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) member States, Russia alone accounts for 92.7 per cent of Kazakhstan's external trade turnover, cementing Russia's economic dominance over this Central Asian member State. [36]



Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev addressed BRICS member States at the Kazan Summit. (Source: BRICS, 24 October 2024)

Breaking down the trade specifics, it is clear that Kazakhstan plays a crucial role in supplying Russia with dual-use products, such as electronics, that can either be used for civilian or military purposes. [37] In this case, local reports have revealed how dual-use products exported to Russia have largely fuelled Russia's war machine against Ukraine, [38] which likely indirectly contributed to human rights violations on the ground. [39] In turn, Russia supplies Kazakhstan with electricity and gas to meet its high energy demand. [40] However, there is a power imbalance in terms of trade between the two economies as Russia controls the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, which constitutes 80 per cent of Kazakhstan's crude oil export route [41] and has historically demonstrated how exporting efforts of Kazakh oil through this pipeline is subjected to Russian permission. [42] Moreover, as energy interdependence between the two economies continues to grow, Russia now owns half of all foreign companies in Kazakhstan [43] as well as 25 per cent of Kazakh uranium production. Thus, the close nature of their trade relationship should not, however, be misinterpreted as Kazakhstan having equal trade footing with Russia; instead, with Russian trade leverage over this Central Asian country, Russia has and will continue to subject Kazakhstan to adhere to its geopolitical aspirations. Against the clear economic dominance over this Central Asian member State, Kazakhstan's actions since the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine have demonstrated a small shift in its diplomatic posture, illustrating its evolving stance on Russia's aggressive foreign policy. In BRIC's 2024 expansion, Russia extended an offer to Kazakhstan to become a full member of BRICS, given Kazakhstan's rapid economic growth and its innate potential to become a powerhouse in the region. [44] On 16 October, Kazakhstan rejected Russia's offer to be a voting member of BRICS, [45] signalling its strategy to assert independence in foreign policy and avoid being further entangled in Russia's imperial ambitions. [46]

This diplomatic decision, however, was not without consequences. Immediately following the announcement, Kazakhstan faced trade reprisals from Russia, as Russia banned all imports of Kazakh agricultural products, such as fruits, vegetables and flowers, under the guise of 'safety concerns. [47] Local sources suggest that these bans could potentially disrupt the Central Asian agricultural market and its supply chains. [48]. The ban has already starkly raised the market price of staple goods in the Kazakh market, further affecting civilian's economic access to food. [49] Despite these challenges, Kazakhstan's rejection of deeper integration with Russia reflects its desire to assert its sovereignty, maintain a neutral foreign policy, and avoid further complicity in Russia's human rights violations in its armed conflict with Ukraine. [50]



A woman buying vegetables at a market in Baikonur, Kazakhstan, suggesting the importance of these staple foods. (Natalia Kolesnikova/Getty Images, 20 September 2022)

Aside from rejecting an offer to join BRICS as a full member, Kazakhstan's commitment to non-intervention, sovereignty, and regional stability was demonstrated during the Ukraine conflict, where Kazakhstan, through its actions, teetered along the lines of a relatively neutral stance and implicitly condemning Russia's actions. [51]

Immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Kazakhstan banned the use of Russian military propaganda symbols in public spaces, [52] approved anti-war rallies against Russian aggression, [53] and even provided humanitarian aid to Ukraine. [54] Noting this trend, Kazakhstan's diplomatic decision to not accept full membership in BRICS in October 2024 emphasised its position as a proponent of peaceful diplomacy, which stands in contrast to Russia's aggressive military tactics. Since then, Kazakhstan has called for peace talks and stressed the importance of 'independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty' [55], which are core principles of international law that give way to the R2P framework. [56] Kazakhstan's stance is particularly noteworthy when considering the multi-vector foreign policy it has pursued. Kazakhstan has worked to balance its relations with China, the United States, and the European Union, thus ensuring that it is not overly dependent on any one power. [57]

By maintaining ties with both Russia and the West, Kazakhstan has positioned itself as a mediator in the region. This strategy allows Kazakhstan to speak out against Russian aggression while also avoiding alienation from the country's key economic partner, [58] as seen in how Kazakhstan kept BRICS at arm's length by only agreeing to be a partner State. [59] Thus, Kazakhstan's approach has demonstrated that smaller States can adopt a diplomatic leadership role in times of crisis, setting an example for other nations in the Central Asian region to act per international law and R2P principles without resorting to military intervention or coercive means.

Uzbekistan's humanitarian stance and regional stability

Uzbekistan, another key Central Asian and partner State in the BRICS+ network, has taken a humanitarian approach to Russia's actions in Ukraine. Uzbekistan's position is particularly significant given its history of balancing its interests with Russia and other international powers. Like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan shares historical ties with Russia that span economic and cultural domains, [60] yet through its multi-vector strategies, this member State has shown a willingness to engage diplomatically with a broad range of partners. [61] Further, despite its sandwiched position between Russia and the West, it has always been Uzbekistan's great interest to avoid being too overtly committed to any political or security alliances in fear of immediate repercussions from its neighbouring aggressor. [62] Instead, its 'can't afford to choose sides' meant that Uzbekistan's engagement with BRICS is likely motivated only by economic benefits, as it seeks to diversify its partnerships and attract investment without fully aligning itself with any single bloc. While Uzbekistan has expressed interest in strengthening ties with BRICS, [63] it is unlikely to pursue full membership in the near future. Thus, given its relatively neutral foreign policy, Uzbekistan's participation in BRICS is likely limited to economic cooperation rather than deeper political integration.



Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev arrived at the BRICS 16th Annual Summit (Source: BRICS, 24 October 2024)

While Uzbekistan maintains trade relations with Russia, it has avoided publicly endorsing Russia's military aggression. Uzbekistan's avoidance of the matter can be seen in how the State has refused to cast any international condemnation against Russia at all five draft resolutions concerning the Russia-Ukraine armed conflict at the United Nations General Assembly from March 2022 to February 2023. [64] Despite its refusal to publicly speak out against Russian aggression against Ukraine, Uzbekistan has, however, strongly implied its disagreement with Russia's actions when it expressed its support for Ukrainian territorial integrity and sovereignty. [65] Instead, since March 2022, Uzbekistan furthered its commitment to aid States subjected to illegal use of force when it dispatched humanitarian assistance, in the form of food, medicine and clothing, to Ukraine. [66]



Citizens from countries like Uzbekistan would partake in mercenary services for the Russian military (Russian Defence Ministry (Source: EYEPRESS/ Reuters, July 2022))

Uzbekistan, another key Central Asian aside from sending much-needed life-saving supplies, Uzbekistan has made significant legal strides in addressing the growing issue of foreign nationals enlisting to fight in Ukraine. [67] This was a long-standing issue which saw Uzbeks taking up arms for the Russian armed forces and being subsequently complicit in war crimes against Ukrainian civilians. In a landmark case, on 4 November 2024, a local court sentenced 51-year-old Alisher Xoliqov to five years in prison for carrying out mercenary activities with the Russian armed forces, highlighting Uzbekistan's commitment to cracking down on such activities

and comes as part of broader efforts to curb the involvement of foreign fighters in the ongoing conflict. [68] Uzbekistan's stance aligns with the broader R2P framework, advocating for preventive diplomacy and regional cooperation over direct military engagement. Despite its limited ability to influence the conflict in Ukraine, Uzbekistan's example demonstrates that Central Asian countries, particularly those with significant diplomatic and economic relationships with Russia, can play a constructive role in promoting development on a regional level while also adhering to international standards related to sovereignty and humanity.

Conclusion

Against the ever-growing list of sanctions imposed on Russian entities and individuals for their aggression against Ukraine, Russia will continue to instrumentalise the BRICS+ network to bypass its economic limitations. As such, the ongoing failure of the international community to prevent or respond to the persistent violation of international law casts doubt on the ideals of the responsibility to protect. [70] Fundamentally, the international community have to push for more effective intervention should a State be unwilling or unable to protect its citizens from grave crimes. [71] Despite this, this article refuses to advocate for military intervention to be part of our responsibility to protect. [72] Instead, using Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as prime examples, this article highlights how States of lesser economic and military stature can balance foreign ties with aggressive neighbouring States whilst contributing to peace and security. Ultimately, bearing in mind the protection of civilians, we all have a role to play in ensuring that no atrocities of such nature ever be condoned, financed or supported ever again.

Recommendations:

- Given their position in the BRICS+ network, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan must continue to advocate for stronger adoption of R2P principles among BRICS Member States. This could take the form of establishing an accountability mechanism within the organisation. Ultimately, BRICS must take clearer positions on preventing State aggression and other grave crimes.
- On a long-term basis, Central Asian States like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan must reduce their economic dependence on Russia to avoid undue coercion to further contribute to Russian aggression against Ukraine. All Central States should never be pawns in Russia's game of nationalistic expansion.
- Moreover, to move beyond Russian influence, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan could defer to other pre-existing regional bodies like the Central Asian Cooperation Organization, which would diversify their diplomatic options and determine the region's collective voice on issues of international crises.

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Navigating security issues: Kyrgyzstan's struggle with economic vulnerabilities and global tensions

Saher Husain

Key takeaways

- Kyrgyzstan is vulnerable to foreign networks' abuse due to economic vulnerabilities or regulatory monitoring inadequacies. This demonstrates the delicate relationship Kyrgyzstan has to balance between global security concerns and challenges of regional stability.
- Kyrgyzstan's current situation helps us understand the difficulties faced by small nations caught in a struggle between powerful nations as it attempts to strike a balance between demands of international security compliance and economic dependence on Russia.
- As the global environment becomes unstable, Kyrgyzstan must adapt to any circumstance it meets to optimise its advantages and reduce any risks brought on by external vulnerabilities

Introduction

Recently, the Spanish government reported that four individuals who were connected to a business network planning to evade sanctions against Russia were arrested on 15 October.[1] They allegedly routed shipments through Spain to avoid any detection by using front companies based in Armenia and Kyrgyzstan to disguise and hide the true destination of the illegal chemical products.[2] While this arrest did not involve Kyrgyz nationals, it does show the country's role in potential illicit trade. Exports of goods going to Kyrgyzstan on paper do not show up at the ports in reality.[3]

By contrast, Uzbekistan's failure to ratify the IMoreover, large exports to Central Asian countries, like Kyrgyzstan, in 2024 have offset at least half the drop in direct exports to Russia by the Western nations.[4] Given that Western nations have implemented various sanctions on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, the role played by Kyrgyzstan in transshipment to Russia reflects a broader issue in its role in maintaining peace and security. Vuk Vuksanović, from LSE IDEAS, mentions that "Kyrgyzstan is emerging as one of the key hubs and nodes of the transshipment of Western goods into Russia. Central Asia is quite a logical route given the region's strategic geography that places the region in the intersection triangle of Russia, China and wider Europe." [5] Therefore, Kyrgyzstan plays a major role in preserving regional stability. As it faces the issue of becoming a conduit for illicit trade in the region, this case highlights the vulnerabilities and geopolitical pressures it encounters while trying to navigate the complex environment in maintaining peace and security.



Russia's President Vladimir Putin with Kyrgyzstan's President Sadyr Japarov in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan 12 October 2023. (Source: Sputnik/Dmitry Azarov/Pool via REUTERS)

Geopolitical pressures

Kyrgyzstan finds itself dependent on Russia both politically and economically, which further extends military and security provisions as well. [6] Remittances from the Russian labour market significantly affect the country's economy, comprising 31% of the national GDP in Kyrgyzstan. [7] The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) act as tools for Russia to further assert its regional dominance. [8] Furthermore, Russia's aid and investment in infrastructure and energy sectors play a major role in Kyrgyzstan's economic landscape. [9] These strengthen its dependence on Russia, leading to an increase in its economic vulnerability, giving Russia influence over the country's policies. [10] Moreover, as the conflict between Russia and Ukraine continues, President Vladimir Putin's first visit, despite his ICC arrest warrant, to Kyrgyzstan shows Russia's persevering interests in the country and the region. [11] This pressure is also evident from President Japarov's neutral stance regarding the Russian invasion and the further intensification of the country's ties to Russia. [12] Given everything, Russia's continued dominance makes compliance with Western sanctions extremely problematic, as it can become challenging for Kyrgyzstan to independently navigate or handle its security-related responsibilities and obligations. Kyrgyzstan must strike a careful balance between ensuring its economic survival in the region and upholding its international legal obligations.

China's increasing interest in the country

While the ties between Russia and Kyrgyzstan remain strong and continue to persist, China also seeks to increase its interest and influence. This opens the doors for positive diversification.

Kyrgyzstan's economic reliance on China has seen a steady increase, as was evidenced by an increase of 12% in trade turnover between the two nations in early 2024 as compared to the previous year. [13] Furthermore, China has renewed its interest in the country by investing heavily in Kyrgyzstan's infrastructure, which includes a major railway project. [14] Du Dewen, Chinese Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan, praised the country, saying that Kyrgyzstan is "a connecting country not only important to Central Asia but also to Asia and Europe as a whole". [15] These events demonstrate China's willingness and desire to increase its power both domestically and regionally.



Chinese Premier Li Qiang meets with Kyrgyz Prime Minister Akybek Zhaparov during the 23rd Meeting of the Council of Heads of Government of Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Islamabad, Pakistan, 15 October 2024. (Source: Xinhua)

Furthermore, last year's China-Central Asia Summit is further seen as evidence of China replacing Russian influence in the region. [16] Such new positive opportunities will help Kyrgyzstan break free of Russian influence and create new economic ties. The evolving partnerships can also be witnessed by the fact that Kyrgyzstan has increased its vegetable imports from Uzbekistan and China while halting all its imports from Russia. [17] However, although there was an increase in Kyrgyzstan's exports to China throughout 2024, the official numbers compiled by Bishkek revealed a deficit when it was compared to what China had accounted for. [18]

This raised concerns and increased suspicions about the possible smuggling of any goods or products from the country to Russia.[19] These irregularities put Kyrgyzstan in a difficult position. The risk and suspicion of such activities on the country exacerbate the pressure on Kyrgyz policymakers as they strive to not only comply with international expectations but also manage important regional alliances and coalitions.



Officials of China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan gathered in Beijing to sign an agreement related to the three-country railway on 6 June 2024. (Source: RFE/RL)

Kyrgyz policy measures

Amid the economic and political sanctions imposed on Russia by the West, scrutiny over Kyrgyzstan's import and export of goods has increased. Reports suggest that Russia has been using Kyrgyzstan as a key third-party country to maintain its trade relations with many European nations.[20] Discrepancies in trade data suggest that large volumes of goods shipped to Kyrgyzstan are re-exported to third countries as not all exports reach the country.[21] However, the Kyrgyz government has mentioned that the State itself is not involved in any of such illicit activities. Kyrgyzstan's State Committee for National Security (SCNS) mentioned that "neither the Kyrgyz state itself nor any state structures and companies are involved in the violation of the regime of compliance with the sanctions restrictions imposed by the United States and Western countries against Russia." [22]

The government has pledged to tighten controls and improve its compliance with the sanctions imposed, promising to include stricter monitoring of suspicious trade activities.[23] However, this raises concerns as to whether these measures will be effective in reality in curbing the illicit flow of goods. The National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic (NBKR) implemented a new rule prohibiting banks from making payments for goods intended for foreign countries without actual delivery to the territory of Kyrgyzstan in September 2024.[24] It effectively closed the channel of transit payment for goods from third countries to Russia via Kyrgyzstan.[25] This benefits Kyrgyzstan and its economy as the goods must now be delivered to the country and be subject to its customs duties and taxes.[26] It has proved detrimental for Russia as the customs and tax costs make re-export less profitable for them.[27] Therefore, this initiative is one step taken that can help the country comply with the sanctions imposed on Russia by deterring any illicit trade. However, there is still a long way to go. Irina Tsukerman, president of Scarab Rising, a security strategy advisory firm, stated that "Russia is managing its energy exports, primarily oil and gas in various forms, using Kyrgyzstan as an effective trade hub to circumvent sanctions and get the fossil fuels into Europe". [28] Moreover, Vuksanović has also stated that "the problem is that if Kyrgyzstan gets sanctioned, a new route will only be discovered. It is also troublesome; how will you sanction everyone willing to do business with Russia as the large majority of the countries around the world never joined the Western sanctions against Russia. The biggest problem is that this would not happen if there weren't still plenty of Western countries, particularly in Europe, who are still willing to trade with Russia and use legal and logistical loopholes to do so".[29] This situation underscores the difficulty of fully containing Russia's economic activities without broader and more coordinated international cooperation



Ministry of Economy and Commerce (MEC) of the Kyrgyz Republic, in partnership with the World Trade Organization (WTO) conducted an intensive capacity-building effort to equip Kyrgyz trade representatives with essential skills and knowledge for effective participation in global trade discussions and agreements on 10 September 2024 (Source: UNDP Kyrgyzstan)

Kyrgyzstan's role demonstrates the complexities smaller states face in navigating the interests of these major powers. The Kyrgyz Republic Country Strategy for 2024-2029, developed by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, introduced new strategies defining the EBRD's priorities in strengthening the private sector and inclusive access to finance. [30] It recognises the reliance of the country's economy on both Russia and China and seeks to promote diversification of the economy and stimulate its trade and export via its Trade Facilitation Programme.[31] In addition to this, the country has collaborated with international organisations like the WTO to increase its export potential and promote sustainable economic growth.[32] These positive steps would help reduce reliance on dominant regional powers and can ultimately provide the country with greater economic and geopolitical autonomy and enhance its stability.

Conclusion

As Kyrgyzstan adapts to the new realities of the ever-changing global events, Russia's and China's influence shaping the geopolitical

landscape in Central Asia is worth our attention. The Kyrgyz government continues to attempt to navigate regional cooperation initiatives with diverse actors. It also has to adjust its policies and economic relations, taking into account the fact that the sanctions on Russia will be in place for years to come. Kyrgyzstan should work towards effectively curbing any illicit trade activities, more so because external vulnerabilities make it difficult for the country to comply with sanctions imposed on Russia. For this, collective action is necessary as this would create more pressure and also compel Russia to maintain its international obligations.

Recommendations:

- There is a need to intensify monitoring and regulating efforts for sanctions evasion. Bodies must be established with clear protocols that can identify and report any sort of suspicious goods/transactions.
- Resources must be dedicated to intercepting Russian goods transiting through Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, there is a need for stricter enforcement on Kyrgyz officials and business figures facilitating any illicit transactions, which should involve increased transparency mechanisms.
- Kyrgyz companies involved in sanctions circumvention must face significant penalties. Kyrgyz businesses should be required to adopt transparency measures, ensuring clear documentation and accountability for transactions, especially those linked to Russia.

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