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INSTABILITY FESTERING IN CENTRAL ASIA: PROBING THE INTERPLAY OF INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FACTORS IN KAZAKHSTAN'S 2022 UNREST

For the last three decades, the Central Asian region has been stumbling upon recurrent turmoils. Issues that are afflicting the region stem from an unrelenting dispute over the democratic transition, disquiet over nation-building concerns, inexorable involvement of great powers, and quest for development through economic restructuring. The continuing pandemic and Russia's Ukraine war intensify the never-ending quandary of the region. Almost all states of the region face similar issues to a varying degree, but the recent mass unrest in Kazakhstan is pointing towards the ensuing dynamics of mixing the internal and external factors. Kazakhstan's sudden descent into chaos is bound to leave a definite impact on its political system hitherto balanced by the bipolar power centre and the fast-changing regional security scenarios following Russia's Ukraine attack.

Keywords: Kazakh-unrest, Ukraine War, Tokayev, Zhanaozen, CSTO, Colour revolution

Introduction

In contemporary times, tumultuous developments in the geopolitical landscape of the Central Asian region have obliged international relations analysts to appraise them in an appropriate context and come out with an objective analysis. The region, for the past few decades, has witnessed frequent upheavals owing to the persistent dispute over the issues of democratic transition, great power influence, troubled ethno-nationalistic upsurges, and economic instability. The ongoing wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, added with Russia's Ukrain attack, has further deepened the incessant predicaments of the region. Recently, in January 2022, Kazakhstan—hitherto a stable polity of the region—suddenly sunk into unrest that took a toll of more than 300 lives and caused destruction worth millions of dollars, besides erupting in a tensed geopolitical scenario within and outside the region. This has raised many questions which require a fair inquisition. However, out of five Central Asian states, Kazakhstan stands fairly ahead of the rest in terms of economic performance, democratic transition, and suitably fixing itself in the matrix of regional geopolitical and geostrategic calculus. Yet, the changing political dynamics in Kazakhstan from the first transition of power from Nursultan Nazarbayev to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in 2019 and the entire course of developments following that transition to the people's protest in January 2022 shows the vestiges of a deeper malaise. In this specific context, this paper attempts to enquire into the undercurrents that caused recent instability and chaos in Kazakhstan and gaze out the prospective scenario considering internal and external factors.

Festering Instability in Central Asia

Recently the two former Soviet fractions, Russia and Ukraine are fighting a war on the issues including conflicting strategic-security concerns. The escalated tension due to Russia's military attack on Ukraine has heavily disturbed the Eurasian region. This tension is a mix of multiple factors: Russia does not want to see Ukraine drifting closer to the Western alliance and upset its 'strategic zone of balance'. On the other, Ukraine's desperation of fixing its persistent conflict with Russia that was exacerbated after the annexation of Crimea in 2014

has brought it closer to the US and NATO.¹ NATO's pitch for its membership to Ukraine is perceived by Russia as a credible threat to its national interest. For instance, declaring war in February 2022, Putin accused NATO of threatening Russia's "historic future as a nation".² According to Robert Hunter, "the current crisis over Ukraine has deep roots and, of course, is not limited to Ukraine. ...Putin has selected Ukraine, on account of its strategic location in Central Europe, to be the leading edge of an attempt to reconstitute the Soviet Union or at least to establish a new sphere of influence in Russia's near abroad."³ Russia's military onslaught, nevertheless, is "the largest military offensive in Europe since the Second World War [and], a prima facie breach of the prohibition on the use of force, as enshrined in Article 2(4) UN Charter and customary international law."⁴

This recent development apart, the disintegrated Soviet states in the Eurasian region have undergone recurrent turbulence during the last three years. Apart from the 2019 protest and 2020-21 political crises in Georgia and the largest anti-government protest in Belarus in 2020-21, the Central Asian states have also undergone frequent mass upsurges and unrest for multiple reasons. In 2019 and 2020, Uzbekistan witnessed a series of unrests over economic, social, and political issues. In 2020, Kyrgyzstan experienced a revolution over fraudulent political affairs. In 2021, Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan region saw huge unrest on the issue of the region's political fate. Moreover, the beginning of 2022 saw Kazakhstan descending into violent unrest, which is the latest in a series of disturbances in the region. The recent years' disturbances in the Central Asian states can be construed in two ways: **Firstly**, the power transitions in the states of the region have yet to accommodate the political aspiration by bringing in the appropriate political structure comprehensively designed to represent fully the multi ethnic and multicultural social order giving due consideration to their

1 Fiona Hill, "Russia's Assault on Ukraine and the International Order: Assessing and Bolstering the Western Response", Brookings, February 2, 2022.

2 Paul Kirby, "Russia and Ukraine Conflict Explained" *BBC News*, February 24, 2022.

3 Robert Hunter, "The Ukraine Crisis: Why and What Now?", *Survival*, 64:1, 2022, p. 7.

4 James A. Green, Christian Henderson & Tom Ruys, "Russia's attack on Ukraine and the *ius ad bellum*", *Journal on the Use of Force and International Law*, 8:2, 2021, Published Online, March 25, 2022.

developmental concerns in a just manner.⁵ This is no denying the fact that the transition had been borne in the way the regime designed it. Obstructions are many, but one of the most manifest reasons seems to be what Assel Tutumlu wrote, quoting Ian Scoones: “Regimes in Central Asia are not only engaged in setting up kleptocratic personalist hierarchies in and through the neoliberal international order but also use analogous tools to acquire power and legitimacy through the populist slogans.”⁶ **Secondly**, the post-Soviet complex geopolitical scenario has its influence on the socio-economic and political dynamics of these states. The great power rivalries prominently occupying the strategic space and capturing the resource-rich market of the Central Asian states have often fuelled the convoluted disturbances. S. Enders Wimbush has appropriately contextualised the Central Asian dynamics as:

The competitive context in Central Asia is formed primarily by two larger dynamics that sometimes overlap, intersect, converge, or collide. The first dynamic is created by outsiders. Central Asia is a caldron of large actors..... Russia’s strategic interests in the region continue; indeed, they have intensified as the presence of other actors has become more pronounced. The second dynamic is created by insiders. Central Asia today is a dynamic mix of local actors redefining themselves along both vertical and horizontal strategic axes.⁷

However, the perceptible scenario in the ‘New Great Game’ as Paolo Pizzolo & Andrea Carteny argue, following the theoretical model of Power Transition Theory (PTT) that it has embraced the obvious shift in the relationship between Russia and China from an expedient Sino-Russian partnership, warranted by the shared concern of the US-led western domination in the wake of the war against terror at the doorstep of Central Asia to a veiled opposition, especially after “China inaugurated the Belt and Road Initiative

5 See: M.Y. Omelicheva, *Democracy in Central Asia: Competing Perspectives and Alternative Strategies* (Lexington, KY, University Press of Kentucky, 2015). Also, S. Abashin, “Nations and Post-Colonialism in Central Asia: Twenty Years Later”, in S. Hohmann, C. Muradian, S. Serrano, S. & J. Thorez (eds.) *Development in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Migration, Democratisation and Inequality in Post-Soviet Era* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

6 Assel Tutumlu, “Central Asia: from dark matter to a dark curtain?”, *Central Asian Survey*, 40:4, 2021, p.

7 S. E. Wimbush, “Great games in central Asia”, In Ashley Tellis, Tavis Tanner, & Jessica Keogh (Eds.), *Strategic Asia 2011–12: Asia Responds to its rising powers*, Seattle and Washington, D.C: National Bureau of Asian research, 2012, pp. 259– 82.

(BRI) and linked it to Kazakhstan's Bright Path strategy and Uzbekistan's New Strategy of Development."⁸ Above all, the fear that "Moscow has military beachheads in Central Asia and is always looking to exploit crises and societal fissures for its geopolitical gain"⁹ cannot be disproved altogether.

Kazakhstan's Descent into Chaos

Kazakhstan, a relatively region's stable polity, the largest economy with an abundance of natural resources, geostrategically located at the intersecting axes of two great powers, Russia and China, has descended into chaos in the first week of January 2022 due to large-scale peoples' uprising. The turmoil is believed to be "the largest and the bloodiest after independence in 1991"¹⁰ and of far-reaching political consequences. This was triggered due to an abrupt fuel price rise but ended up leaving behind significant and sweeping political changes in the country. The chaos began on New Year's Day in the southwestern city of Zhanaozen and spread across the country turning into a violent conflict. The issue started with the government's removal of the price cap on liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), leading to its price rise which sparked protests and demonstrations nationwide. But the focus shifted swiftly from LPG price rise to deteriorating socio-economic conditions and a frail political system, before "morphing into scenes of violence."¹¹ Zhanaozen, the epicenter of the unrest, saw more than 50 thousand strong protestors joining the battle without any definite leadership.¹² Maksat Ibagarov, head of the local

8 Paolo Pizzolo & Andrea Carteny, "The New Great Game in Central Asia: From a Sino-Russian Axis of Convenience to Chinese Primacy?", *The International Spectator*, Taylor & Francis Online, Published online on January 10, 2022, DOI: 10.1080/03932729.2021.2007611.

9 Andrew D'Anieri, "How the Central Asian States Can Protect Themselves From Russia", *The Diplomat*, January 24, 2022.

10 Dan Bilefsky, "Revolt in Kazakhstan: What's Happening, and Why It Matters", *The New York Times*, January 5, 2022.

11 Annette Bohr, "What Chance for Genuine Change in Kazakhstan", Chatham House, February 7, 2022.

12 Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska, "Do Kazakhstan's Protests Signal an End to the Nazarbayev Era? *Aljazeera*, January 11, 2022. To note that the head of criminal prosecution at the prosecutor's office claimed that it was strange to observe that more than 50 thousand odd people were led by none.

government of the region, attempted to convince the protesters but failed. Within a matter of days, the unrest spilled over to other regions of Kazakhstan. They spread all across major commercial cities from Nur-Sultan, Almaty to Aktobe. The protesters were not supported either by any ideological group, political party, or union, but they indeed constituted certain clusters of the society. In Zhanaozen, Aktau, and Aktobe mostly they were oil workers; in Karaganda coal workers; in Zhezkazgan they were drawn from copper smelters; while mostly civil society activists were involved in the country's financial centre Almaty.¹³ In Almaty, thousands of protesters were involved in riots and arson. They set government buildings on fire, seized the city centre, and controlled the international airport. Private properties were also vandalised and robbed. "Whether this was a democratic uprising, a Colour Revolution, or an Arab Spring type of protest"¹⁴, analysts are struggling to conclude.

As a result of this unrest, a two-week state of emergency was declared on 5 January 2022 by President Tokayev in Almaty and the western Mangistau province and ordered security forces to "open fire with lethal force" levelling them as the "bandits and terrorists".¹⁵ Tokayev called the protests a "coup attempt" supported by "foreign-trained Islamist radicals".¹⁶ Moreover, the intensity of protest gradually increased and the law and order situation sharply fell. Tokayev consequently sought help from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), of which Kazakhstan is a member. In response, the CSTO deployed around 4,000 troops. The entire incident witnessed the arrests of more than 10,000 civilians and hundreds of deaths. Before the order was established in the second week of January, as Serik Shalabayev, the head of the criminal prosecution at the prosecutor's office, said, during the state of emergency, a few hundred bodies of people were delivered to morgues, of which 19 were law enforcement officers and military personnel.¹⁷

13 P. Stobdan, "Turmoil in Kazakhstan" *DPG Policy Brief*, January 17, 2022.

14 Ibid.

15 Shaun Wailker, Kazakhstan President Says He Gave Order to Open Fire with Lethal Force, *The Guardian*, January 7, 2022.

16 *BBC News*, "Kazakhstan Unrest was Coup Attempt, says President", January 10, 2022.

17 *The Guardian*, "Kazakhstan Authorities Raise Death toll from Unrest to 225", January 16, 2022.

Is the Unrest a Complex Interplay of Economy and Politics?

The turmoil was not just a protest over the price rise of LPG, but it was more than that. Although the crisis erupted over an economic issue, it soon captured political and social issues and converted into a mass protest leading to riots and arson. However, the tipping point of the whole episode was the government's withdrawal of price controls on LPG in its successive de-subsidising move since 2019, which allowed the market to dictate prices. This resulted in a price rise from 60 tenges (\$0.14) to 120 tenges (\$0.28) per litre.¹⁸ What is commonly believed turned out to be true that "fiddling with fuel prices was always bound to inspire rage."¹⁹

Moreover, the people involved in protests and turmoil underwent simmering discontent against the rising prices of commodities, shrinking opportunities for employment, widening economic inequality, narrowing space for political participation in the nation's crucial political decisions, and entrenched corruption at all levels of society. The protest started in the western Mangystau region—the region rich in petroleum resources but poor in living standards as compared to the big cities like Nur-Sultan, Almaty, and Shymkent. Poor infrastructure, below standard public amenities, and difficulty in having food availability due to remote access generally raise its cost even as compared to richer urban centres. However, the Mangystau region has been susceptible to recurrent upheavals. In 2011, there was unrest staged by oil workers that ran for more than six months and took a toll on more than a dozen people's lives. Since then, the Zhanaozen region has been sensitive for both the Kazakhstani government and the society at large.¹⁹

The involved but disgruntled masses had their long-held grievances—an interplay of politics and economy: "riddled by corruption, lack of political choice and civil freedoms where ordinary people often struggle to make ends meet while the elite lead luxurious lives."²⁰ For the last few years, the dissension among common people against the rise of crony-capitalist trends, capturing the economic power by a handful of elites has been on the rise. According to a report

18 Almaz Kumenov and Joanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan Explainer: Why Did Fuel Prices Spike, Bringing Protesters Out Onto The Streets?" *Eurasianet*, January 4, 2022.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska, "What is Behind the Protests Rocking Kazakhstan," *Aljazeera*, January 5, 2022.

by an international agency, “more than half of the nation’s wealth is held by 162 rich Kazakh.”²¹ The lack of economic opportunity and poor functioning of the social safety net has added intensity to the growing restlessness. The young ethnic Kazakh who lived in rural areas and moved towards urban areas or big cities like Almaty or Nur-Sultan in search of jobs more often faced tough economic challenges such as income inequality, unremitting employment conditions, and poor living standards.²² The pandemic has added further woe to the flagging economy. Besides financial problems, the pandemic has set off other issues such as low salaries, late paychecks, poor working conditions, and exacerbated corruption leading to the social, political, and economic discontentment amongst the people of Kazakhstan.²³ Further, due to the pandemic, “the growth rates were estimated to stay as low as 2.5% in 2021 and 3.5% in 2022 while inflation rocketed above 7%.”²⁴ The World Bank experts have observed that poverty and inequality have increased due to the protracted pandemic. Shrinking of growth not only led to erasing of per capita income gains but caused a reversal in plans to reduce poverty levels. According to Amelie Schurich-Rey, an analyst, “as many as 26% of women and 22% of men reported job losses.”²⁵

This entrenched economic inequality has its political facets. President Tokayev in his address to the parliament, blamed Nazarbayev and oligarchs allied with him for entrenched inequality and bad economic conditions of the nation.²⁶ Nazarbayev ruled the country for 30 years before stepping down in the 2019 power transition and he had an overweening influence over the critical functions of the government. Tokayev himself was his ‘hand-picked’ and some of the key positions in political and economic spheres were occupied by Nazrbaev’s aide. Tokayev vociferously alleged that “the economy was dominated

21 KPMG, “Private Equity Market in Kazakhstan”, KPMG in Kazakhstan and Central Asia, May 2019, p. 23. URL: <https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/kz/pdf/2019/09/KPMG-Private-Equity-Market-in-Kazakhstan-ENG-2019.pdf>

22 Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska, “What is Behind the Protests Rocking Kazakhstan”, *Aljazeera*, January 5, 2022.

23 Paul Stronski, “Kazakhstan’s Unprecedented Crisis”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 6, 2022.

24 Zaki Shaikh, “Economic fallout of pandemic stirs unrest in Kazakhstan”, *Anadolu Agency*, January 6, 2022.

25 Quoted by Zaki Shaikh, “Economic fallout of pandemic stirs unrest in Kazakhstan”.

26 Annette Bohr, “What Chance for Genuine Change in Kazakhstan”, Chatham House, February 7, 2022.

by a few wealthy oligarchs while millions of ordinary Kazakhs struggle to make ends meet.”²⁷ He added, “it is thanks to the first president... that a group of very profitable companies and a layer of rich people even by international standards has appeared.”²⁸ It is no denying the fact that the nephew of Nazarbaev, Samat Abish was second-in-command at the National Security committee. Timur Kulibayev, the son-in-law, served as chairman of the Central Asian nation’s main business lobby group. Kulibayev, together with his wife, owns Kazakhstan’s biggest bank, Halyk. Dimash Dosanov, another son-in-law, the husband of Aliya Nazarbayeva served as chairman, KazTransOil. Kairat Sharipbayev is believed to be the husband of Dariga, the oldest daughter, was chairman of QazaqGaz (formerly KazTranGaz). People’s frustration was evidently visible against the political elites who seemed to be busy making a shining fortune at the cost of people’s plight. There was an extensive public annoyance against the existing political system. The most pronounced slogan that reverberated throughout the protest ground was “Shal, ket!” – “Old man, get-go!”²⁹ This was most likely used for Nazarbaev. Nazarbaev’s monument was pulled down in the town of Taldykorgan. However, protesters carried banners in Almaty which wrote, “we are not terrorists, we are ordinary Kazakhs.”³⁰ All these led to sweeping changes in the political corridor. Nazarbayev was “removed” from his role as chair of the National Security Council. Prime Minister Askar Mamin resigned and consequently, Alikhan Smailov, previously First Deputy Prime Minister, has been chosen as the Acting Prime Minister. Later his key ally Karim Massimov, internal security chief, was arrested on the charge of treason, and his nephew Samat Abish, the deputy head of the National Security Council, was also fired. Murat Bektanov and Daryn Tuyakov were relieved from their duties as the Defense Minister and Deputy Minister respectively.

Apart from these reasons, conspiracy theories abound. Among them, the dominant was the theory of attempted coup. In fact, “the removal and arrest

27 Nastassia Astrasheuskaya, “Kazakhstan Leader Vows to Tackle Inequality behind Protests”, *Financial Times*, January 12, 2022.

28 *Ibid.*

29 Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska, “What is Behind the Protests Rocking Kazakhstan”, *Aljazeera*, January 5, 2022.

30 *The Times*, “Kazakhstan Protests: We Stood there with Flags and Banners. Then they Began Shooting”, January 2, 2022, URL: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/kazakhstan-protests-we-stood-there-with-flags-and-banners-then-they-began-shooting-scnrznkrk>.

of Masimov on charges of treason point to the possibility that there was an attempted coup d'état against President Tokayev by Nazarbayev's clan."³¹ It is believed that "Nazarbayev's family had left Kazakhstan, and he has not been seen in public since the end of December 2021."³² However, this report was denied by Nazarbayev's close aide Aidos Ukibai, his press secretary. Moreover, taking control of the Kazakh Committee for National Security (KNB) building, the presidential palace, and the airport in Almaty without much resistance from the state apparatus deepens the doubt over the accountable offices, especially KNB and its head. "To many Kazakhs, it was clear who was behind these actions. Tokayev himself hinted at this when he accused the KNB of ignoring a "critical threat" and allowing their offices to be attacked without putting up a fight."³³ Tokayev told the CSTO: "Under the guise of spontaneous protests, a wave of unrest broke out.....It became clear that the main goal was to undermine the constitutional order and seize power. We are talking about an attempted coup d'état,"³⁴ Robin Forestier-Walker, an expert on Central Asia, observed that "perhaps [the unrest] was more an internal affair and an elite power struggle for control of Kazakhstan."³⁵

Probing External Factors: Regional Geopolitics and Kazakhstan's Stand

The world cannot remain immune to the development of Kazakhstan. The "bloody protest" put strains on the regional powers such as Russia, China, and the extra-regional power the US and the EU, and they all seemed worried about their future stakes in the region. This incident allowed Russia to author again a script for itself as a security provider to the Central Asian region as "Kazakhstan has again come into Russia's orbit and the power vacuum which was created earlier in this region now can be filled by Russia again."³⁶ Russia-

31 P. Stobdan, "Turmoil in Kazakhstan" *DPG Policy Brief*, January 17, 2022.

32 *Ibid.*

33 Arkady Dubnov, "Kajakhstan: A Coup, a Counter-Coup and a Russian Victory", *Aljazeera*, January 16, 2022. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/1/16/a-coup-a-counter-coup-and-a-russian-victory-in-kazakhstan>

34 *Aljazeera*, "Kazakh Leader Declares 'Coup d'état' over as Putin Claims Victory", January 10, 2022.

35 *Ibid.*

36 P. Stobdan, "Turmoil in Kazakhstan" *DPG Policy Brief*, January 17, 2022.

led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) intervened within days to quell the disturbance by deploying more than 4000 strong multinational forces drawing from Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The intervention took place after Tokayev's appeal and, for the first time, the security provisions under Article-4 of the CSTO were enforced.³⁷ Though, contrary to the analysts' apprehension that Russia's larger objective was to station its forces for a long time, the CSTO withdrew quickly after stabilising the situation; yet, leaving behind a strong message that Russia factors in Central Asia. Russia's step certainly makes China and the US circumspect as both major powers have economic and strategic interests entangled in the region.

Unquestionably, Russia has always been worried about its influence and strategic-security concerns in the breakaway regions of the erstwhile USSR. Russia's Ukraine attack strongly corroborates this thesis. To note, power equilibrium in the region including Kazakhstan after 9/11 was disturbed by the US presence in the name of fighting international terrorism. Russia's swift response and resolute support to President Tokayev's call for neutralising the instability revived its bonds. Undeniably, Russia's readiness to arrest unrest first and foremost can be seen in its calibration of maintaining a stable and peaceful Kazakhstan amidst the reality that the festering instability had crippled many of its ex-partners such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan; while other former Soviet states like Ukraine and Georgia have busted the relations with Russia.

Russia has some major interests, especially in the fields of defence, space, oil, and uranium mining in Kazakhstan. On the security front, however, the matter of worry for Russia remains its 7,600-km long porous border which the two states share. The porous border is susceptible to infiltration. This is a serious vulnerability considering the likelihood of spill-over of radical Islam and narcotics from the Af-Pak region. President Tokayev's assertion that "the protesters were terrorists drawn from the ranks operating in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and the IS"³⁸ intensified the Russian concerns. Another important factor is that the Northern Province of Kazakhstan is home to 3.5 million ethnic Russians, which are in the majority in that area and share their strong bond with Russia.

37 Rounak Bagchi, "Explained: What is CSTO, the Organisation helping Kazakhstan President Deal with Protestors", *The Indian Express*, January 8, 2022.

38 *Eurasianet*, "Kazakhstan: Dozens Killed as Government unleashes Military Crackdown", January 6, 2022.

China's strong presence in the region in the field of energy and infrastructure development has diluted its dependence on Russia. In this whole incident what has been observed is that China adopted the policy of wait and watch. It is because of Beijing's long-standing policy of non-interference, as well as the belief that "a solid economic presence will automatically lead to a favorable image and increased voice in local politics." China maintains limited political interference and in the aftermath of this unrest, it has patiently reacted.³⁹ On the contrary, the unprecedented crisis in Kazakhstan has brought Russia and China closer but increased the political rivalry with the West. As Zhang Xiao, China's ambassador to Kazakhstan pointed out that "China planned to enhance law enforcement and security cooperation with Kazakhstan and its neighbors in order to oppose 'external interference', whether it be Islamic extremism or 'colour revolutions' plotted by the West."⁴⁰ He stated further that "the violence in Kazakhstan was evidence that more needs to be done in the fight against the 'three evils' of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism, and at the same time offering to increase SCO involvement in the region."⁴¹ How China and Russia observe the crisis and re-position their stands "reflects shifting views within the Kremlin toward Beijing and about Russian foreign policy as a whole.... Russia no longer views the engagement of other powers in its backyard as the zero-sum game that it did 10 or more years ago."⁴² Even in Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, China seems to stand with Russia to ensure unity against the West. In the future, there may be some sort of frictions or geopolitical competition between the two but both the countries shared a similar intention and scheme *vis-à-vis* Kazakh turmoil.

In this whole episode, the US closely followed the situation. The presence of Russian troops has brought criticism from the US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, who said "one lesson of recent history is that once Russians are

39 Igor Denisov, "After Kazakhstan Crisis, China Will Reassess its Influence in Central Asia", *The Diplomat*, January 18, 2022; URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/after-kazakhstan-crisis-china-will-reassess-its-influence-in-central-asia/>.

40 Reid Standish, "Crisis in Kazakhstan Pushes China, Russia Closer Together", Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty (RFERL), January 2022, URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-crisis-russia-china/31659765.html>.

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Ibid.*

in your house, it's sometimes very difficult to get them to leave."⁴³ Russia's foreign ministry called Blinken's remarks offensive and responded with sharp words: "When Americans are in your house, it can be difficult to stay alive and not be robbed or raped."⁴⁴ Russia sniffed the US-led west hands in the disturbance. Though, the US has denied any role in the unrest and also denied the allegations imposed by Russia on it to destabilise the region by invoking "colour revolution" type of episode in the name of democracy and human rights.⁴⁵ After the US-led war on terror in September 2001, the US gradually rose to a new rapprochement in the Central Asian region but as far as Kazakhstan is concerned, its significant investments in the energy sector brought the two countries much closer. The US and Kazakhstan share a strategic relationship as Kazakhstan is part of NATO's 'Partnership for Peace initiative' and it hosts an annual military peacekeeping exercise, 'Ex Steppe Eagle'.⁴⁶ No doubt, Kazakhstan's development has generated a debate over the diminishing role of the western countries especially the EU and the US. Russia-led CSTO operation establishes that it is irreplaceable with either West including the USA or any other great power—newly anchored in the region—like China and in return Central Asian republics repose faith and allegiances in the same degree towards Moscow to get Russian support for any tension within or outside their territory.

Another side of the developments needs to be further inquired about. It may also be observed that the promptness with which Moscow responded to Tokayev's call was in some way an opportunity of shunting Nazarbayev—a leader who has had a background of having independent dealing with the Kremlin. Nazarbayev was not largely considered to be "Putin's yes-man". The 'multi-vector foreign policy' pioneered by him accorded weight almost equally to the regional and the extra-regional powers such as Russia, China, the US, the EU, and even

43 *BBC News*, "Kazakhstan Unrest: Blinken Questions Russian Troop Deployment", January 8, 2022.

44 *Reuters*, "Russia Reacts Furiously to Blinken Jibe over Troops in Kazakhstan", January 8, 2022. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-reacts-furiously-blinken-jibe-over-troops-kazakhstan-2022-01-08/>.

45 Tom O'Connor, "With Ukraine Tensions High, Russia Blames U.S. Armed 'Interferences' for Kazakhstan Crisis", *Newsweek*, January 7, 2022, URL: <https://www.newsweek.com/ukraine-tensions-high-russia-blames-us-military-actions-kazakhstan-crisis-1666983>.

46 Deepak Kumar, "The Kazakh Unrest", *IDSA Comment*, January 12, 2022, Manohar Parrikar IDSA; URL: <https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/the-kazakh-unrest-kdeepak-120122>.

NATO. Nazarbayev, “being the ideological architect of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), attempted to offset Russia’s enormous economic influence by different balancing measures within and outside the EAEU”.⁴⁷ His exit from key positions of Kazakh power and in his place Tokayev’s growing sway and all-out support from Moscow can reinforce Russia’s strategic concerns. Therefore, “supporting Tokayev was a natural decision for the Kremlin. Considering the situation unfolding in Kazakhstan, perhaps the CSTO acted just in time to prevent alternative leaders from emerging and thus kept Kazakhstanis marching around Tokayev.”⁴⁸

The receding footprint of western countries in the region, as well as NATO’s withdrawal from Afghanistan, led to their further loss of influence. Several other powers, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, India, Korea, and Japan have sought to develop some influence in the region. They all bring some unique advantages, but none of them has been able to transcend their limitations.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, Kazakh unrest has brought a new political scenario for both sides (Moscow and Washington). C. Rajamohan observes, “The West can continue to challenge Moscow’s efforts to reclaim regional primacy, but it is not in a position to secure Russia’s Eurasian periphery against the Kremlin and this would certainly improve Moscow’s chances of leading a new Eurasian geopolitical order.”⁵⁰ Moreover, Aliya Askar has argued that “seeing war in Ukraine, one can even suggest that Kazakhstan’s January events were a perfect opportunity to showcase the “goodwill and fairness” of Russia, ahead of the February invasion of Ukraine.”⁵¹

Conclusion

Kazakhstan’s January 2022 unrest and its successful termination leave behind some fascinating analyses. There have been pointers towards

47 Sanshiro Hosaka, “Moscow-Backed Tokayev’s Coup Against Nazarbayev?”, International Centre for Defence and Security, Estonia, URL: <https://icds.ee/en/moscow-backed-tokayevs-coup-against-nazarbayev/>

48 Aliya Askar, “Kazakh-Russian Relations in the Context of the War in Ukraine”, *The Diplomat*, March 7, 2022.

49 C. Rajamohan, “Understanding Eurasian Turmoil”, *The Indian Express*, January 12, 2022.

50 *Ibid.*

51 Aliya Askar, “Kazakh-Russian Relations in the Context of the War in Ukraine”, *The Diplomat*, March 7, 2022.

internal instigation—a clash between political elites. This was substantiated by the president Tokayev's statement that the unrest was an attempt of *coup d'état* against his regime by an influential political power centre of the country, directing toward the former president and his aides. The turmoil, however, broke due to the rapid developments followed by the LPG price hike but festered across the country turning up into violent strifes. There has been a unipolar-political-power-arrangement in Kazakhstan until Tokayev became 2nd president in 2019, giving rise to a bipolar one. Tokayev remained constrained throughout his journey of over two years as most of the critical power centres were occupied by the Nazarbayev's confidante and his family members who perhaps contrived to replace Tokayev at an opportune moment. The gathering storm of protest which converted into an outsized upheaval provided this opportunity. Therefore, the theory of the elite-turf-war arousing the flame of unrest could not be thrust aside.

The three-decade rule of former president Nazarbayev is seen as mixed baggage of success and failure. The modernised economy and diversified foreign policy branded as multi-vector policy externally, fail to complement the quest for democratic transition internally. Therefore, openness and transparency in the system of governance, accountability of power centres, and just political order proved to be a chimaera. People were disgruntled due to long-standing politico-economic issues and they felt all these took place owing to carefully drawn out elite planning of aggrandising self-interest at the cost of their interests. Speedy action to suppress the unrest by the incumbent president Tokayev and his promptness of opening the avenues for economic reforms immediately controlling the situation and hammering out sweeping changes in the key positions of the country indicate that the current regime did not leave any scope for being exploited politically.

The era of Elbasy is over, and the stain of the controlled regime (by a powerful elite complex) is being worn down. Nonetheless, it is too early to establish that Kazakhstan has entered a new phase. Moreover, extra-regional powers' interests in Kazakhstan have been a critical factor in the country's political affairs. Russia's endemic concern of maintaining its influence in Central Asia to guard its vital interests serves both ways. Kazakhstan sought swift intervention by Russia-led Central Asia's security apparatus for quelling the unrest and successfully stabilising the situation which sets a pitch of trustworthiness between the two countries. Amidst fear of Russia's aggressive posture that is established with the Ukraine war, the West sees its interests undermined. Such tumultuous upheavals

and conflictual geopolitical dynamics in the region give rise to a fear of the return of the great game in Central Asia.

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