

# **Kazakhstan's Military Reform and OSCE Chairmanship: Regional Implications**

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DOI: [10.1163/187502309787858156](https://doi.org/10.1163/187502309787858156)

## Kazakhstan as a Balancing Regional Power

During the 2000s Kazakhstan's economy was growing at an average ten percent against the background of virtually a one-party system under the leadership of President Nursultan Nazarbayev. Despite a lagging democratic record Nazarbayev remains a popular leader nationally and enjoys some popularity among the Kyrgyz and Tajik public. Compared to his Central Asian counterparts he was able to balance Kazakhstan's cooperative ties between Russia, China, the EU and the U.S. While being an active member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Kazakhstan was also an energetic supporter of cooperation activities within the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, beginning in 2006, the EU became Kazakhstan's major trade partner, while the Nazarbayev government sought to boost ties with the U.S. as well. Cooperation with the EU and the U.S. took place simultaneously to Kazakhstan's breakthrough achievements as member of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. Among other Central Asian states, only Kazakhstan moved towards implementing the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO in January 2006 and appointed an influential and competent civilian Defense Minister Daniel Akhmetov.<sup>2</sup> The IPAP paved the way for NATO's further assistance to Kazakhstan in carrying out military reform, building naval forces on the Caspian Sea and reaching greater interoperability between the two sides.

Kazakhstan's comparatively successful cooperation record with Western states and NATO took place in parallel to Nazarbayev's strive to chair OSCE in 2010. Altogether, the military reform and OSCE chairmanship improved Kazakhstan's image internationally as a potentially reliable economic partner and a political ally. Yet, although Kazakhstan's cooperation with NATO led to positive effects in the country's military reform, whether the same effects will replicate themselves regionally remains dubious. Likewise, if Kazakhstan achieves greater political liberty as a result of OSCE chairmanship, its success might have a limited impact on its neighbors. On the one hand Kazakhstan's economic influence over Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and even Uzbekistan has been increasing since 2000.

Despite the economic crisis in Kazakhstan, its banking system is still leading in the region. Furthermore, hundreds of thousands of labor migrants from these states work in Kazakhstan. On the other hand, none of these states showed a similar level of enthusiasm towards cooperation with NATO. Central Asian leaders' political will to improve their democratic record remained low with rigged elections continuing to take place and freedom of speech shrinking every year. With that, Central Asian leaders showed their interest in allying with Kazakhstan at times when they needed to make important geopolitical decisions. Kazakhstan should use this opportunity and share its experience with NATO and OSCE regionally.

## Kazakhstan's Participation in International Peacekeeping Activities

The Central Asian States' willingness to cooperate with the U.S. and NATO in the anti-terrorism campaign in Afghanistan following the events of 9/11 was unprecedented. Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan allowed

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1 The SCO chairmanship rotates on an annual basis, however, China is the domineering actor in the organization with most ties formed bilaterally between member states and China.

2 Uzbekistan's Defense Minister Kadyr Gulyamov who served during 2000-2005 had a civilian background as well. Yet, under Gulyamov the country's democratic control of armed forces did not improve and the Uzbek military showed little interest in participation in international peacekeeping activities.

stationing of the U.S. and NATO troops on their territories, while Kazakhstan sanctioned its airspace. However, a few years into the anti-terrorist campaign, cooperation between NATO and the Central Asian states revealed that neither party is particularly interested in full-fledged engagement. Central Asian states showed their predisposition to cooperate with Western powers only when it benefited the ruling regimes, while NATO never declared its long-term interests in the region but rather tailored its activity to the developments in Afghanistan. Among all, only Kazakhstan continued to strengthen cooperation with NATO, becoming a breakthrough example in Central Asia.

The Central Asian leaders often used foreign policy options in their own favor, seeking primarily to strengthen their regimes. Both Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and Uzbek President Islam Karimov's willingness to participate in NATO's anti-terrorism campaign were mostly rhetorical, averted by possibilities of more lucrative and stable support offered by Moscow or Beijing. Along with Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon, these leaders continued to enhance security structures to meet the challenges of their regimes as opposed to the population or regional instabilities. One example is Uzbekistan's ousting of a U.S. military base in July 2005 following the violent government suppression of riots in Andijan city. As his popularity plunged, Bakiyev sought greater support from CSTO and SCO leaders while occasionally intimidating U.S. diplomats and allowing the rise of anti-U.S. sentiment in the public. Amid these changes and fluctuations in foreign policy, the democratic record continued to worsen in each Central Asian state.

Kazakhstan was the only Central Asian country where NATO was able to reach interoperability with the local military in peacekeeping operations. Nazarbayev's regime showed greater propensity towards involving the Kazakh military in international peacekeeping efforts. For Kazakhstan, closer cooperation with NATO signified greater stability of its economy and reliability of its government. During August 2003-October 2008 Kazakhstan deployed its peacekeeping battalion Kazbat to Iraq under Polish command. The battalion's main function included de-mining, medical help to local citizens, and professional training of Iraqi government troops.<sup>3</sup> Kazbat was formed with the U.S. assistance and proved to be the hallmark of Kazakh- U.S. military relations. Its 29 men were professional servicemen from Kazakhstan's Special Forces and 35th air assault brigade.<sup>4</sup>

Kazakhstan's relations with NATO through IPAP proved to be a regional breakthrough, as it also reverberated in the political domain. IPAP civilian control over the military institutions, encouraged improvement of the human rights situation in the army and emphasized the importance of scientific research in the defense sector.<sup>5</sup> Kazakhstan's former Defense Minister Altynbayev Mukhtar was the primary official to establish ties with NATO and improve democratic control of Kazakhstan's armed forces. However, he, too, was primarily protective of Nazarbayev's regime by placing the armed forces on standby during presidential elections in December 2006.<sup>6</sup>

As former Prime Minister Akhmetov was appointed Defense Minister in January 2007, a military doctrine that prioritized cooperation with NATO was adopted. Two years past the IPAP, Kazakhstan's ties with NATO improved significantly, overriding those of Uzbekistan. A five-year bilateral defense agreement between

3 "Armiya novogo veka" [The new century's army], *Kazhstanskaia Pravda*, May 6, 2006.

4 Roger N. McDermott & Col. Igor Mukhamedov, "Kazakhstan's Peacekeeping Support in Iraq", *Central Asia – Caucasus Analyst*, January 28, 2004.

5 Roger N. McDermott, "Kazakhstan's Partnership with NATO: Strengths, Limits and Prognosis", *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, (5)1, 2007, 15.

6 McDermott, "Kazakhstan's Partnership with NATO", p. 16.

the U.S. and Kazakhstan signed in 2003 was renewed in 2008 with new prospects for collaboration. In 2009 Kazakhstan's defense budget considerably exceeded the U.S. assistance, \$1,28 billion and \$200,000, respectively.<sup>7</sup> During 2002-2009, the number of joint activities in the defense sector more than doubled. The reform of the national armed forces and active cooperation with the West contributed to Kazakhstan's positive image internationally.

## Economic Cooperation with the EU

As Kazakhstan's economy grew throughout the 2000s, Nazarbayev's strive to diversify international economic cooperation prompted him to seek greater involvement with the EU. In the U.S. and the EU, Kazakh diplomats backed by influential businessmen pushed for greater business ties with Kazakhstan. The country's positive image was sought through publications, advertisement and public events. Arguably, Kazakhstan's struggle for the OSCE chairmanship was part of the larger strategy of enhancing the country's brand. Kazakhstan's cooperation with NATO thus coincided with the country's increased economic cooperation with the EU states. For Kazakhstan the EU represents the major export partner, with 45.4% of its exports, or €10.8 billion, in 2006 directed to the region. The EU is also the second biggest import partner for Kazakhstan after Russia. EU imports in 2006 comprised 25.7% or €5.4 billion. The overall trade between the EU and Kazakhstan in 2006 reached €16.3 billion, compared to €10.6 billion with Russia.<sup>8</sup> With that, the EU is Kazakhstan's primary direct investor, with over 40% of total investments in 2005. About 80-90% of the EU investments are in the oil and gas sector with Italy, the UK and the Netherlands being the major investors.<sup>9</sup>

## Regional Implications

Unlike Kazakhstan, NATO's increased engagement with the Central Asian states led to little if any political change. The control over the military remained in the hands of the executive power with loyal defense ministers serving the president. Likewise, NATO's presence did not augment foreign direct investment or detach the Central Asian states from pervasive Russian influence. The Kazakh president, meanwhile, maintained a balanced approach to his collaboration with NATO and Russia. While boosting relationships in both directions, Kazakh officials rejected any notion of joining the alliance or stationing U.S. military on its territory.

Kazakhstan's own balanced approach to foreign policy reverberated elsewhere in the region for the first time following Russia's military campaign in Georgia in August 2008. Nazarbayev's reluctance to support Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia's independence at the SCO summit in Dushanbe in August 2008 clearly damaged the organization's internal cohesion, revealing cleavages between its strongest members—Russia and China. But Nazarbayev also gave hope to Bakiyev and other Central Asian leaders to maintain a more balanced East-West policy in spite of Russian pressure. The ruling elite of Kyrgyzstan, the CIS's chair when the Russian-Georgian conflict occurred, were nervous about the CSTO and CIS summits held in Bishkek where Russian President Dmitry Medvedev was expected to push Bishkek further into recognition of

7 Joshua Kucera, "Interview: Lieutenant General Bulat Sembinov, Deputy Defense Minister, Kazakhstan", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, March 26, 2008.

8 EU Bilateral Trade and Trade with the World. Kazakhstan, [http://ec.europa.eu/trade/issues/bilateral/countries/kazakhstan/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/trade/issues/bilateral/countries/kazakhstan/index_en.htm), accessed 28 May 2008.

9 The European Commission's Delegation to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, [http://delkaz.ec.europa.eu/joomla/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=24&Itemid=36](http://delkaz.ec.europa.eu/joomla/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=24&Itemid=36), accessed on 28 May 2008.

Georgia's breakaway territories. By contrast, prior to the August 2008 SCO summit, the Bakiyev government followed Russian directives in the international arena unconditionally, for instance, in voicing disapproval of Kosovo's independence or voting against Ukraine's WTO membership.

However, although beginning in the mid 2000s, Kyrgyzstan's political and business elites could no longer ignore Kazakhstan in international affairs, these were the very same military elites who vehemently supported both the CIS and CSTO. This military leadership was by and large supportive of Medvedev's and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's campaign in Georgia. Like the Russian leaders, they too believed in the righteousness of Russian politics and the West's desire to destabilize Russia through proxy wars in Georgia. Although Bakiyev refrained from making any statements in support of Russia or condemnation of the West, several military officials eagerly publicized their strong opinions. Most career military officials were educated in Russia and value their extensive network gained during their military education during or after the Soviet regime. Former Secretary of the Security Council Miroslav Niyazov also has criticized SCO for failing to establish an international balance in the Caucasus by supporting Russia.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, military officials with experience in the Soviet war in Afghanistan were inclined to compare Russia's military campaign in Georgia with Afghanistan. According to this view, Russia had to confront the West's proxy war in Georgia instigated to undermine its internal stability. Kyrgyz and Central Asian military officials, thus, genuinely believed in the fact that the CIS and CSTO constituted a final opportunity to restore justice in the Caucasus.

## Conclusions

Kazakhstan's successful cooperation with NATO, the EU and the U.S. has contributed to its recognition as a nation with great economic and political potential. The country has demonstrated some important achievements in the area of military reform. Its OSCE chairmanship is likely to bring more positive changes in the political domain as Kazakhstan's trade relations with the EU have reached a new hallmark in the past few years. Yet, it remains questionable whether positive changes inside Kazakhstan entailed by NATO and OSCE chairmanship would similarly reverberate on a regional scale. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan which have fallen into a deeper dependence on their neighbour, have used Kazakhstan as a shield in the foreign policy choices that have opposed Russia's stances. Whether these trends will continue and other Central Asian states will show similar zeal towards reforms remains to be seen. Kazakhstan, for its part, should promote its successes regionally as one of its obligations as the OSCE chair.

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<sup>10</sup> [www.akipress.kg](http://www.akipress.kg), August 29, 2008.



This article was published by the Security and Human Rights Monitor (SHRM).

Security and Human Rights (formerly Helsinki Monitor) is a journal devoted to issues inspired by the work and principles of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It looks at the challenge of building security through cooperation across the northern hemisphere, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, as well as how this experience can be applied to other parts of the world. It aims to stimulate thinking on the question of protecting and promoting human rights in a world faced with serious threats to security.

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