



Prospects for Kazakhstan's Internal and Foreign Policy

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The largest anti-government protests in Kazakhstan's history have weakened the stability of the regime and its international position. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev used suppression of the demonstrations to seize full power in the state and remove the influence of Nursultan Nazarbayev, who had been controlling things behind the scenes. He turned to military support from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), which will increase Kazakhstan's dependence on Russia and permanently limit its room for manoeuvre in foreign policy, hampering its relations with the EU and the U.S.

On 2–6 January, [nationwide protests broke out in Kazakhstan](#) triggered by an increase in gas prices. The authorities responded with brutal pacification, killing several hundred people and arresting several thousand (exact numbers are unknown). President Tokayev asked for support from the CSTO as a member state. On 5 January, the CSTO sent multinational forces to Kazakhstan as part of an “anti-terrorist” operation to secure state administration buildings, critical infrastructure, and military facilities. This facilitated the quick suppression of the demonstrations by the Kazakh security forces. The CSTO troops did not actively participate in the pacification of the protests and on 13 January began withdrawing from Kazakhstan, ending on 19 January.

The protests highlighted the internal problems of Kazakhstan that have existed for 30 years and are related to social inequalities and the [deteriorating standard of living](#). The demonstrations, initially of an economic nature, quickly gained a political character due to dissatisfaction with the authoritarian system of government in the country symbolised by Nazarbayev, who ruled for 30 years.

Consequences for Domestic Politics. President Tokayev used the destabilisation of Kazakhstan's internal situation to seize full power in the state. Tokayev, Nazarbayev's protégé, succeeded him in 2019 after the latter resigned the presidency, and was being prepared to become the state's future long-time leader under a [controlled power succession](#). Informally, however, it was Nazarbayev who was to rule Kazakhstan for life as *Elbassy* (an honorary title that means “Father of the Nation”), chairman of the Security

Council (supervising and controlling the president, the government, and power structures), and the leader of the ruling Nur Otan party. However, growing tensions in the ruling camp in recent months and the growing ambitions of Tokayev led to Nazarbayev being removed from making the most important decisions. In a 5 January message to the nation, Tokayev announced that he was taking over the chairmanship of the Security Council, which gave him control over the entire state administration and security services. By this, Tokayev broke the informal controlled succession agreement with Nazarbayev. Nazarbayev himself was probably interned (he had not been seen in public for almost a month, then on 18 January he made a prepared speech in which he called on citizens to unite around Tokayev).

With the support of the State Security Service subordinated to him directly, Tokayev then began a purge of people loyal to Nazarbayev. It covered the most important state institutions, including the dismissal of executives and commanders in the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Defence, the secret services, the military, and the police, some of whom died under mysterious circumstances. Nazarbayev's closest associates were dismissed, including the head of the National Security Committee, Karim Massimov (on charges of attempting a coup d'état), and Prime Minister Askar Mamin (held responsible for the outbreak of the protests). The wide personnel changes made it difficult for the regime to quickly pacify the protests, particularly because of communications deficiencies in the chain of command and cases of soldiers and police joining the demonstrators, so Tokayev finally decided to use the

CSTO assistance. However, the clear purpose of the forces sent to Kazakhstan was not so much to support the Kazakh authorities in suppressing the protests, but to secure Tokayev's takeover of power, especially with regard to some of the power structures that could have tried to remain loyal to Nazarbayev where the CSTO forces performed a disciplinary function.

By effectively pacifying the protests, the Kazakh regime has proved that it has a sufficiently strong apparatus of coercion to ensure its continued existence, even at the cost of strengthening its authoritarian character and deteriorating its international image. The authorities did not express readiness to solve the growing socio-economic problems that were the source of these protests, proposing only temporary solutions (e.g., freezing gas prices for six months). Together with the bloody consequences of the demonstrations, this course has strengthened the anti-government mood in Kazakh society and the potential for further protests in the future.

Consequences for Foreign and Security Policy. Thanks to its involvement in stabilising the situation in Kazakhstan as part of the CSTO peace operation, Russia has strengthened its influence over the Kazakh authorities. By supporting President Tokayev, it has created new instruments of political pressure on the Kazakh regime (for example, it can [threaten to withdraw its support in the event of any further protests or tensions between the ruling elite, or by deliberately provoking them](#)). Russia will be interested in a stronger permanent presence on the territory of Kazakhstan where [it currently has three military-related facilities, including a lease for the Baikonur Cosmodrome, but it has no proper military base](#). Another way it may influence the policy of the Kazakh authorities may be the instrumentalisation of the Russian minority in Kazakhstan (about 23% of the population) and attempt to extend its rights or demand that it be granted autonomy in the north of Kazakhstan (for example, following the model of [Russia's actions towards eastern Ukraine](#)).

Russia's strengthened position in relations with the Kazakh authorities increases its influence over the entire Central

Asia region. The use of these instruments may, in the future, be used by Russia to force Kazakhstan to make a number of political decisions favourable to it, such as recognition of the annexation of Crimea or to be more assertive in its relations with China ([e.g., as regards China's increasing military involvement in the region](#)).

Kazakhstan may also be forced to limit its involvement in regional cooperation in Central Asia, which [it initiated jointly with Uzbekistan after 2016](#). Its aim was to strengthen the position of the countries in the region in relations with Russia and China. At the same time, Russia will expect Kazakhstan to comply with its main policy goal towards the region, [which is the development of Eurasian integration \(EEU, CSTO\) with the participation of all Central Asian states](#). Kazakhstan's mediation may be particularly important in Russian efforts to persuade Uzbekistan to join both of these organizations, as well as Tajikistan's accession to the EEU.

Conclusions and Perspectives. President Tokayev has successfully consolidated power and will be able to maintain the current political and business model of the Kazakh elite, which will ensure the stability of his rule in the short term. At the same time, he will continue the purge of people loyal to Nazarbayev. However, in the long run, the unresolved socio-economic problems that are the cause of this year's protests will again lead to internal crises.

Tokayev's role was strengthened at the cost of weakening the regime's stability (as a result of the protests) and its international position, and has deepened Kazakhstan's dependence on Russia in the security sphere. The weakening of Kazakhstan's regional position strengthens Russia in Central Asia, which will use it both in its relations with China (emphasising its role as a guarantor of [stability in a region important for China](#)) and to further weaken the influence of the EU and the U.S. in the region.

The failure of the Kazakh model of controlled succession as a result of the conflict within the ruling elite will translate into a strategy of maintaining power by other authoritarian leaders in Central Asia, as well as in Russia, Belarus, and Azerbaijan, encouraging them to exercise power openly in their countries for life.