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RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN KAZAKHSTANI MULTIVECTORISM

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Kazakhstan's international outlook, and its longstanding multivectoral posture more in particular, came to experience significant stress as Russian troops entered different combat theatres across Eurasia. Here, I refer not only to the Kremlin's ongoing attempt to obliterate Ukraine as a state and a nation but also to the shorter, yet by no means inconsequential, Russia-led CSTO mission that brought to an end the unrest erupted across Kazakhstan in early January 2022. In a relatively short timeframe—CSTO troops landed in Almaty on 6 January; the invasion of Ukraine was launched on 24 February—Russia's interventions redesigned the contours of the geopolitical milieu wherein Kazakhstani foreign policy has normally operated. This short policy brief reflects on this changing environment, asking whether Eurasia's shifting geopolitics remain a conducive environment for Kazakhstani multivectorism.¹

Inflection Point #1: CSTO troops in Kazakhstan

While the origins of the *Qandy Qantar* events are deeply entrenched in dynamics of regime evolution, its solution is to all intents and purposes intrinsic to the network of authoritarian solidarity germinated in early 2022 out of Collective Security Treaty operationalisation. In a move widely seen as a clear departure from established policies seeking Kazakhstan's equidistance from Eurasian powers, Toqayev called on Vladimir Putin to underwrite a CSTO mission tasked to protect critical infrastructure while Kazakhstani troops were re-establishing order across Kazakhstan. This mission brought with it a series of significant foreign policy implications that have been widely debated across the community of scholars working on the international relations of post-Soviet Eurasia. Building on prior work on Kazakhstani Eurasianism,² I regarded the presence of Russian troops on Kazakhstani soil as an indicator that the long-term pursuit of multivectoral foreign policy had lost most, if not all, relevance.³ Nargis Kassenova, one of the most acute observers of Kazakhstani foreign policy, argued on the other hand that only a marginal intensification of Russian-Kazakhstani ties was to crystallise after the intervention had concluded.⁴ Although diverging, our views originated in informed readings of domestic processes of regime evolution. I regarded the deployment of the mission as an outward manifestation of a pact of authoritarian solidarity connecting both the stability and the durability of the Toqayev regime to vital support extended by the Kremlin; Kassenova pivoted on recent efforts to strengthen Kazakhstan's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity as indicators that the CSTO mission does not have to be seen as a clear advancement of Russia's neo-imperial agenda in Kazakhstan.

As it left a dramatic imprint upon Kazakhstan's public consciousness, the *Qandy Qantar* events instigated an extensive process of regime reboot on the other. Influencers, opinion-makers and propagandists working for the Toqayev regime began to talk, in the spring of 2022, of a New Kazakhstan—a path of controlled reforms that addressed some long-held grievances without diluting the regime's authoritarian control over the society at large. While it does not entail a new foreign policy—as Deputy Prime Minister Roman Vassilenko told me

¹ Rachel Vanderhill, Sandra F Joireman, Roza Tulepbayeva, Between the bear and the dragon: Multivectorism in Kazakhstan as a model strategy for secondary powers, *International Affairs*, 96 (4) 2020: 975–993.

² Luca Anceschi, *Analysing Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy—Regime neo-Eurasianism in the Nazarbaev Era*. Abingdon-New York: Routledge, 2020.

³ Luca Anceschi, Kazakhstan: Secrets, Lies, and Foreign Troops. *Strategic Europe*, 11 January 2022.

⁴ Nargis Kassenova, Why Kazakhstan Will Not Be Returning to Russia's Fold. *The Washington Post*, 13 January 2022.

in a recently held public forum⁵—this New Kazakhstan had to contend, since its very onset, with the geopolitical storm instigated by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Inflection Point #2: Russia’s invasion of Ukraine

The international reaction to Russia’s unjustifiable invasion of Ukraine established a new international environment, defined by the rapid dilution of globalisation flows and the emergence of two juxtaposed blocs rallying around Russia and NATO respectively. This new environment has presented the government of Kazakhstan with a valuable opportunity to minimise the consequences of the political pact that presumably paved the way for the deployment of the CSTO mission. Kristoffer Rees has brilliantly outlined the skilful political manoeuvres whereby the Toqayev regime endeavoured to indicate, internally as well as internationally, that its views of the Ukrainian conflict are not beholden to the Kremlin’s neo-imperial agenda.⁶ At the same time, however, disentanglement is not a completely cost-free undertaking. Bhavna Davé noted that a complex set of geo-economic factors and established linkages, further entrenched by interaction as part of the Eurasian Economic Union [EaEU], may eventually complicate the regime’s attempts at decoupling from Russia.⁷

In post-invasion Eurasia, can multivectorism be reduced to the adoption of a merely neutral posture *vis-à-vis* the Ukrainian conflict? When addressing the complexities inherent to this question, consider the juxtaposition between the Kazakhstani voting activity within the UN framework and the regime’s numerous declarations confirming its commitment not to circumvent international sanctions on Russia. The polarisation ensuing from the Russian invasion represents in this sense an even more significant obstacle to Kazakhstan’s attempts at maintaining a multi-vectoral policy while the war progresses. Polarisation, in other words, reduces the range of vectors available at any given time to Kazakhstan. In a world that polarises around Russia’s international agenda, the preservation of a healthy relationship between the Toqayev regime and the Kremlin may not be an option easily accessible by Kazakhstani diplomats. Conversely, balancing ties with the West may prove detrimental to keeping alive economic engagement with the Russian Federation. New Kazakhstan does not need a new foreign policy, if we believe the official line: however, new regional and international strategies are perhaps exactly what the Toqayev regime need to navigate Eurasia’s current geopolitical juncture.

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⁵ The full video of the event, titled ‘Kazakhstan – Building back better following a turbulent January’, is available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/video/kazakhstan-building-back-better-following-a-turbulent-january/>.

⁶ Kristoffer Rees, How Ukraine Could Remake Kazakhstan’s Relationship with Russia. *The Diplomat*, 10 March 2022.

⁷ Bhavna Davé, Ukraine conflict: Kazakhstan’s difficult balancing act between need for Russian support and popular opposition to the war. *The Conversation*, 11 April 2022.