

Kazakhstan after Crimea: 'you cannot choose your neighbours'

Erika Holmquist

Kazakhstan is in an awkward position after Russia's recent aggression against Ukraine. Russia's annexation of Crimea and support to the pro-Russian separatists of eastern Ukraine have caused deep concern in Kazakhstan and the other former Soviet states. The events in Ukraine showed that Russia was prepared to breach legally binding state-to-state agreements. The annexation of Crimea sets a disconcerting precedent. It revealed that Russia is ready to redraw borders by force, and that its commitments to honour the former Soviet republics' territorial integrity cannot be trusted. The challenge for Kazakhstan is now to find a new way to manage its international relations.

Kazakhstan and the other former Soviet states find the Russian arguments for intervention in Ukraine alarming. Russia claims to have a duty to protect ethnic Russians, Russian-speakers and compatriots outside of Russia's borders. The word 'compatriot' provides wide scope for interpreting who constitutes an eligible recipient of Russia's protection. Not only does Kazakhstan have a significant ethnic Russian minority, but the Russian Law on State Policy on Compatriots Abroad also includes 'those born in the Soviet Union who now live in states that used to be part of the Soviet Union'.

Kazakhstan views itself as a bridge between Europe and Asia. Since independence in 1991 it has used the term multi-vectoring to describe its foreign policy strategy. It is a pragmatic strategy to further its national interests and achieve policy objectives by cultivating good foreign relations in all directions. In pursuit of economic development and independence Kazakhstan has struggled to balance its relations with Russia, China and the West. Kazakhstan shares a border with Russia that is close to 7000 km long. About a quarter of Kazakhstan's population is ethnically Russian (according to its 2009 census), mainly residing in the areas bordering Russia (see the map below). Despite the multi-vectoring approach Kazakhstan has had to emphasise Russia in its foreign policy and they cooperate closely on security and economic issues.

Kazakhstan's relationship with Russia is different from Ukraine's. While Ukraine has ignored various Russian schemes for reintegration, Kazakhstan has made a conscious

choice to remain close to Russia by joining the Customs Union. It made this choice in spite of the fact that the EU was Kazakhstan's most important trading partner in 2013, followed by China. Russia only came third, accounting for 13.5 per cent of Kazakhstan's foreign trade (compared to 35.6 per cent for the EU countries). For Russia, Kazakhstan was its eighth most important trading partner in 2013, accounting for 3.4 per cent of Russia's foreign trade (the EU countries accounted for 48.5 per cent). Security is also an important area of cooperation within the Kazakhstan-Russia relationship. Kazakhstan is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Despite this close relationship, Kazakhstan's president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and foreign minister, Erlan Idrissov, have underlined that the multi-vector policy is Kazakhstan's only avenue for collaboration with the international community. However, Russia's zero-sum view of Ukraine's policy choices and its readiness to intervene in Ukraine's internal affairs mean that Kazakhstan's ability to pursue a multi-vector policy is in doubt. Russia could force Kazakhstan into an even closer relationship if relations between Russia and the West deteriorate further.

The Russia-Kazakhstan relationship has been strained since the annexation of Crimea. For example, at the Seliger Youth Forum in August 2014, Putin called Kazakhstan Russia's 'closest strategic ally and partner', immediately before backhandedly complimenting the Kazakh president for being able to create a state where there had not been one before. He also said that Kazakhstan understands the benefit of remaining within the Greater Russian world. By praising Nazarbayev's unique state-building skills, Putin implied that Nazarbayev, who is nearing retirement age, was the only force holding Kazakhstan together. However, the Kazakh khanate was an independent state for about 400 years before it was taken over by the Russian Empire and Putin's remarks were not well received by Kazakhs. On Kazakhstan's Independence Day (15 December 2014) Nazarbayev announced that the 550th anniversary of the Kazakh khanate will be celebrated in 2015.

To hedge its bets Kazakhstan has countered Russian

policy inside the Customs Union. When the EU imposed sanctions on Russia, fellow Customs Union members Kazakhstan and Belarus declined Russia's request to join its counter-sanctions. As of 1 January 2015, the Customs Union transformed into the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and thereby deepened economic integration between Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and the new member Armenia. In May 2015 the union will expand as Kyrgyzstan also becomes a member. Opposing Russia's ambitions to create a political union, Kazakhstan has repeatedly stated that it will only participate if the platform remains exclusively economic. In August 2014, Nazarbayev reiterated that Kazakhstan will leave the EEU if Kazakh interests or independence are jeopardised. This is perhaps Kazakhstan's main trump card in its relations with Russia. The EEU – which is a project of prestige for Russia – would be considerably less significant if Kazakhstan were to leave it.

Post-Ukraine, membership in the EEU comes at a price for Kazakhstan. Russia's expectations and insistence that EEU members should side with Russia if relations with the West worsen will most likely increase. Furthermore,

the exchange of sanctions between Russia and the West is already having a negative impact on Kazakhstan's economy.

Prompted by the deteriorating economic situation, Nazarbayev, who normally gives his annual address in January each year, moved the speech for 2015 to November 2014, and presented a new economic strategy. He concluded that Kazakhstan is at the centre of geopolitical tensions and therefore experiencing negative consequences. He emphasised that only strong states and united people will be able to handle the global challenges to come and that the only remedy is to build a successful economy. Perhaps as a sign of unease, the EEU was not mentioned once in his speech, and it is usually at the top of Kazakhstan's economic priorities.

Russia's actions have placed Kazakhstan in a paradoxical situation. The fact that Russia has revealed coercion to be a viable option for achieving its foreign policy goals makes multi-vectoring even more attractive, while at the same time making it a high-risk project. Kazakhstan will find itself compelled to continue its complicated balancing game in what appears likely to be an increasingly turbulent future. As Nazarbayev has said, 'you can't choose your neighbours'.

