
THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE KAZAKHSTAN STAYS IMPORTANT

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Among the five Central Asian states, Kazakhstan stands out. Vast energy resources and a strategic location have lent the sprawling country considerable geopolitical importance and drawn the eye of outside powers. Since the state gained independence in 1991, Russia has kept the close ties it forged with Kazakhstan during its imperial and Soviet periods. China has taken a growing interest in the country, too, importing Kazakh energy and planning deeper inroads into its northwestern neighbor through the Belt and Road Initiative. And even the United States has a stake in the former Soviet republic, both because of its energy industry – California-based Chevron Corp. is a key partner in multiple major Kazakh energy projects – and because of its proximity to Afghanistan. Kazakhstan, after all, played a central role in helping U.S. and NATO forces run supplies into Afghanistan along the Northern Distribution Network until the route's demise in 2015.

Now that relations between the United States and Pakistan are souring, Washington may once again turn to Kazakhstan to serve its strategic needs in the region. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev discussed the issue with U.S. President Donald Trump on Jan. 16 during a visit to the White House, an early stop on a three-day tour of the United States. (The trip will also include a visit to U.N. headquarters in New York, since Kazakhstan assumes the rotating U.N. Security Council presidency this year.) But even if Kazakhstan's prominence on the international stage remains the same, plenty of change awaits the country and its longtime leader on the domestic front.

Having been in power since before Kazakhstan emerged as an independent state, Nazarbayev has overseen enormous changes in the country. The president guided Kazakhstan through the final days of the Soviet Union, through the upheaval that followed its collapse and into a new millennium. Along the way, he helped build the Kazakh economy – by far the largest in Central Asia today – by opening up the country and its promising energy sector to the outside world. He also brought stability to Kazakhstan by establishing a strong, centralized government under his strict control and by managing the various clans and power factions at play in Kazakh politics. It's no wonder Nazarbayev, who has won each presidential election in the country with over 80 percent of the vote, is considered Kazakhstan's leader for life.

But every life has its limit. And at 77 years old, Nazarbayev appears to be approaching his. Kazakhstan's only leader is aging and rumored to be in poor health. Nevertheless, the plans for what will happen when Nazarbayev inevitably leaves office are opaque; many inside and outside the country fear that his death or retirement could destabilize Kazakhstan. The president tried to assuage those concerns last year by issuing a directive that would devolve some of the powers of his office, such as setting economic policy, to Parliament and to the Cabinet. Peaceful transfers of power in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, moreover, have raised hopes that Kazakhstan can pull off a smooth transition. To help ensure that outcome, Nazarbayev has surrounded himself with a cadre of loyalists (mostly family members) who will carry on his vision for the country.

At the same time, however, Kazakhstan's characteristic prosperity and stability are also coming under strain. The precipitous decline of oil prices in 2014 dealt a stunning blow to the country's economy, from which it has yet to recover. Even before oil prices tanked, Kazakhstan's weak banking sector, coupled with repeat recessions since the fall of the Soviet Union, had left the economy vulnerable. Delays in major energy projects due to the complexity of the country's energy fields have only added to the financial pressure. And though Kazakhstan has so far escaped the security problems that have plagued many of its neighbors in Central Asia — including a civil war in Tajikistan and two revolutions in Kyrgyzstan — it is no stranger to volatility. The country weathered violent riots by striking oil workers in 2011 and has endured several attacks allegedly perpetrated by Islamist militants, most recently in 2016.

Chances are these issues will come to a head eventually — perhaps even this year. When they do, Kazakhstan is bound to receive even more attention, from the United States and beyond.

Kaynak/Source: