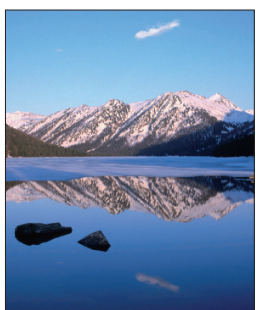


Multi-vector foreign policy

KAZAKHSTAN IS BALANCING ITS INTERESTS WITH THOSE OF ITS NEIGHBOURS



The country's foreign affairs agenda is inevitably dominated by its relations with Russia and China

Kazakhstan's hosting of the OSCE summit in December 2010 is just one of many signs of a surprisingly dynamic and rounded foreign policy. It has positioned itself as a pole of stability in Eurasia, particularly after the events set in motion by 9/11 brought the region back to the centre of world geopolitics.

Sharing lengthy borders with Russia and China, and in an unstable region rampant with ethnic tensions, terrorism, and religious extremism, President Nursultan Nazarbayev can in part attribute his two decades in office to his skilled international statesmanship in balancing his country's interests with those of his powerful neighbours, as well as providing vital regional stability for smaller states.

Over the last decade, Kazakhstan has quietly been assuming more and more influence in the region. It is a leading member of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the successor organisation to the Soviet Union, as well as the Shanghai Security and Cooperation Organisation, which unites Eurasia's states with Russia and China. Thanks to its good relations with Russia and China, Kazakhstan is also a valuable partner for the US and Europe.

Kazakhstan already plays a central role in tackling regional issues that have become global issues. They include: water management and the fight against environmental disasters such as the disappearance of the Aral Sea; stabilising Afghanistan; fighting drug trafficking and transnational crime; and transport issues that range from easing oil and gas transit to addressing the debilitating delays at border crossings. But Kazakhstan's foreign affairs agenda is inevitably dominated by relations with its two giant neighbours, Russia and China.

Over time, Kazakhstan has learned to maintain a privileged and cordial working relationship with Russia. Little wonder: it shares a 7,591km border with its powerful neighbour. Economic interweaving between the two countries is considerable: of the 14 Kazakh oblasts (administrative regions) seven front onto a Russian region. Interdependence created by regional development policies during the Soviet era survives in part, sustained by an intertwined communications infrastructure. Links to Russia were given a boost in July 2010 when a customs union incorporating Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus came into operation, largely thanks to Astana's determined insistence.

Astana sees Moscow's power as stemming from Kazakhstan's heavy integration in the Russian political-economic-cultural sphere; it has also a sharp understanding of the Kremlin's determination to protect its own interests within this vast country on its southern flank. Such 'interests' are rarely expressed in public; relations between Moscow and Astana are not often threatened by crisis. Similarly, while the Chinese authorities enjoy cordial relations with all five Central Asian states, Kazakhstan enjoys a unique status with Beijing. Since 2005 the China-Kazakhstan partnership has been termed a 'strategic' one, the highest of diplomatic epithets, confirming that Astana is considered a major political ally by Beijing in the post-Soviet space, and all the more so at a time when the Kazakh government is displaying balanced and diversified policies in the face of Moscow's heavy-handed presence. However, despite this obvious confluence of political will, strategic cooperation remains tentative: while the Sino-Kazakh economic partnership functions well, the strategic alliance continues to be impeded due to differences of opinion and of interests, and, on the Kazakh side, uncertainty about the long-term ambitions of its Chinese neighbour toward the region as a whole.

The Sino-Kazakhstani privileged partnership is based on a multifaceted economic reality: China-Kazakhstan trade represents more than two-thirds of all trade between China and Central Asia. In the years to come, this trade will be further strengthened by Astana's entry to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), since this will enable Chinese companies to invest further in Kazakhstan.

Energy stakes make up a key element in the China-Kazakhstan partnership. The Chinese strategy for the purchase of oil fields is influenced by Beijing's late arrival to the Kazakh market, and thus China can only acquire sites of relatively marginal importance. In spite of this handicap, in less than a decade, Chinese companies have successfully entrenched themselves in the Kazakh energy market.

In short, Kazakhstan's position regarding its regional role might usefully be summed up by the country's Ambassador to the United States (and former Ambassador to the United Kingdom), Erlan Idrissov, who said recently "some people take it as a curse that we have Russia and China as our biggest neighbours, and others take it as a blessing, but we take it as a fact of life."