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SOVIET TEMPLATE, INFLUENCE GROUPS, AND  
SOCIETAL ROLE**

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The invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 marked a significant global political development, shining a spotlight on post-communist Eurasia. While this region rarely captured global news attention before, policymakers and scholars increasingly recognize Central Asia's pivotal role in global affairs, recalling Brzezinski's 'The Grand Chessboard' thesis. Analysts often focused on the impact of the war in Ukraine on Kazakhstan, Astana's relations with Russia and the West, and foreign policy options available to Kazakhstan in the current geopolitical realities. While these are important matters, a comprehensive understanding of Kazakhstan's foreign policy requires a deep dive into the corridors of the government's decision-making. This paper sheds light on how foreign policy is formulated in Kazakhstan, focusing on key "influence groups" and the role of civil society and public opinion.

## **SOVIET LEGACY: THE CENTRALIZED DECISION-MAKING**

The totalitarian nature of the Soviet regime, characterized by Kremlin-based central planning, a coercive apparatus, and top-down decision-making, significantly influenced the institutional designs of Central Asian states. Individual Soviet republics lacked the authority and capability to engage in independent policy-making across various public domains, with foreign policy falling under the purview of Moscow's nomenklatura.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asian leaders faced the challenge of building new states and establishing diplomatic relations with foreign countries. While they lacked the qualifications and experience for these tasks, they inherited from the Soviet era an authoritarian style of decision-making and management. This style extended to areas ranging from the recruitment of civil servants to the handling of government critics.

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In line with the authoritarian context, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev held exclusive rights and responsibilities for formulating and implementing foreign policy. Similar to past Soviet leaders, Nazarbayev alone determined Kazakhstan's international alliances, with his rulings receiving legitimization from the "rubber stamp" parliament. Kazakhstan's constitution and legislation, reflecting a super-presidential and consolidated authoritarian regime, vested Nazarbayev with such powers.

Given the absence of a civil society in the Soviet Union, public opinion on foreign policy was often disregarded. Nazarbayev followed the decision-making pattern of Soviet leaders and did not find it necessary to consult the public on foreign policy matters. In fact, he was frequently quoted as saying that traditionally, Kazakhs entrusted the rights and responsibilities for their clan's well-being to the tribe's 'aksakals' or elders.

Furthermore, in the early years of Kazakhstan's independence, when the country faced significant socio-economic and political crises, Nazarbayev frequently emphasized the importance of drawing lessons from the experiences of Asian tigers such as South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan. These nations had achieved success through strong presidential leadership and central planning.

### **INFLUENCE GROUPS: KINSHIP, CLANS, AND PATRONAGE NETWORKS**

While the country's president holds the central authority in shaping foreign policy, there exist two significant circles of influence on this policy. The first circle encompasses actors with informal status and influence. In 1991, when Kazakhstan gained independence, the emerging civil society and political opposition had limited involvement in advising or influencing foreign policy decisions. President Nazarbayev primarily sought input from his family, clan, loyalists, and political and business elites, some of whom held formal government positions, while others operated in more informal capacities within the family and government-controlled corporate and industrial sectors, which included media, banking, telecom, oil, gas, and mining.

This "informal influence" group played a vital role in shaping the formulation and execution of Kazakhstan's foreign policy. Their influence was particularly evident in actions such as lobbying for favorable domestic and international policy outcomes, applying pressure on politicians, offering bribes to foreign entities, outmaneuvering business competitors in government procurement tenders, and establishing connections with foreign partners.

For instance, substantial construction and management contracts related to Kazakhstan's notably expensive EXPO-2017 event were allocated to members of

Nazarbayev's clans and elites [1]. In 2019, Kazakhtelecom, the nation's primary telecom operator controlled by Nazarbayev's nephew Kairat Satybaldy, signed a memorandum of cooperation with China Mobile International within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) [2]. Furthermore, the 2019 imprisonment of Mukhtar Dzhakishev, a former CEO of KazAtomProm, is viewed by many in Kazakhstan as Russia's attempt to hinder Kazakhstan's ascent in the global nuclear industry [3]. Dzhakishev had protested against RosAtomProm's decision to exclude Kazakhstan from trilateral nuclear cooperation with Japan and was incarcerated on what the opposition believes to be politically motivated charges. Dzhakishev's case underscores that foreign actors, particularly Russian oligarchs, also exert influence on Kazakhstan's foreign policy.

## FORMAL ACTORS

The second category that provides input into Kazakhstan's foreign policy-making includes a set of formal institutions, namely, Nazarbayev and his successor Tokayev consult with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the President's office, various government think tanks such as the Institute of Strategic Research under the President of Kazakhstan and the Academy of Public Administration under the President of Kazakhstan, the ruling party (now Amanat, earlier Nur Otan), and more recently academic institutions such as the Nazarbayev University.

President's annual gathering with representatives of foreign delegations, embassies, and foreign business communities, such as the American Chamber of Commerce and the European Business Association in Kazakhstan, is another source of input into foreign policy. This tradition dates to the 1990s when, in search of international recognition and investments, Nazarbayev was vehemently appealing mainly to the Western governments about Kazakhstan's commitment to free market reforms and democratic principles. This commitment, paired with a dire need for hard currency, was largely responsible for Kazakhstan's pro-Western foreign policy.

President advisors are key sources of influence on foreign policy matters. This particularly applies to Yermukhamet Yertysbaev, who served as Nazarbayev's long-standing advisor, Yerlan Karin, who advises President Tokayev. These actors stand out for their role in offering guidance not only on domestic matters but also on national security, international trade, cooperation, and participation in regional and international organizations.



## NAVIGATING THROUGH FORMAL AND INFORMAL ACTORS

Considering the interplay of actors involved in the formulation of foreign policy, the crucial role of the president's advisors is in coordinating, bridging, balancing, and negotiating interests and demands of various often conflicting groups. When the interests of formal and informal actors coincide, it leads to smooth, win-win foreign policy outcomes. Presidents find themselves in a much more difficult situation when demands do not match. Which side should the president and the nation's main foreign policy institution – the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – take is a question that hardly received any attention in Kazakhstan.

To answer the above question, one should remember that Kazakhstan is an authoritarian regime whose ultimate goal is to survive. To ensure its survival, authoritarian regimes strive to protect and promote the interests of their support base (clans, military, elites) and yet maintain some degree of satisfaction of the electorate through cooptation or coercion. As mentioned above, aligning foreign policy with the interests of the support base and the electorate is the regime's best-case scenario. Thus, Astana's decision to bid for the chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in 2010 was a move that promoted Kazakhstan, boosted its global visibility, benefited the interests of its major economic sectors (business elites), and eased Western governments' pressure on Kazakhstan's poor human rights record (political elite).

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When the interests of formal and informal actors clash, the Kazakh government pursues the least costly course of action, prioritizing, where possible, the interests of the latter. For instance, Kazakhstan's reluctance to pressure the Chinese government regarding the oppression of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang is the regime's favouritism towards oligarchs benefitting from Chinese engagement within the BRI framework. The Foreign Ministry has been under constant social and diplomatic pressure from both domestic and international parties to no avail, which brings us to the next point: the contemporary role of societal actors.

## THE SOCIETAL FACTOR: TOKAYEV'S 'LISTENING STATE'

According to Tokayev, last year's January turmoil marks the beginning of 'New Kazakhstan' which will put an end to social injustice and inequality caused by Nazarbayev's clan, demonopolize the economy, liberalize nation's political scene, and transform it into the 'listening state' that will be more open to public concerns, grievances, and demands. One year after the January events, we can scrutinize the progress of reforming Kazakhstan. Based on the existing treatment of political protesters, presence of political prisoners, intimidation of the opposition, and fraudulent presidential and parliamentary elections, political scientists, human rights watchdogs, and civic activists maintain that there has been no significant change since a 'New Kazakhstan' doctrine was announced. Most, if not all, of the abovementioned issues relate to domestic affairs, and the Kazakh government has not changed its stance towards political issues. But what about foreign policy? Does Tokayev listen to people when it comes to foreign policy?

Kazakhstan's ambiguous response to the war in Ukraine reflects existing mixed feelings in the society. It is hard to forecast the reaction of Tokayev to vociferous pressure from society to either support or condemn Russia's military campaign. Had the society's position regarding the war in Ukraine been clearer, Tokayev would have faced severe consequences either with the West or Russia. As a result, Kazakhstan is still pursuing a multi-vectored foreign policy which is quite strongly supported by the population.

Another example that demonstrates the government's responsiveness to the public's engagement in foreign affairs is its support of Russian citizens relocating to Kazakhstan to escape military mobilization in Russia. Kazakhstan did not carry out prohibitive measures against Russian citizens, a policy that Kazakh citizens supported. A massive earthquake in Turkey and Syria mobilized Kazakh citizens and businesses to collect and send humanitarian aid to the Turkish side. Official Astana immediately followed suit and sent emergency teams and official aid to Turkey.

Besides the Russia relations and the issue of the war in Ukraine, Tokayev's other primary concern is policy towards China. In this problematic domain, the interests of society do not often match the government's policy. The public's suspicious and wary attitude towards the growing Chinese presence in Kazakhstan has already led to anti-Chinese demonstrations in 2016 and numerous smaller protests against the oppression of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang since then. So far, the Kazakh government has managed to balance societal, formal, and informal institutions concerning the Chinese question.

Recently, the Foreign Ministry announced that in May 2023, Kazakhstan and China intend to sign a visa-free regime. Given the sensitivity of the issue, it is not surprising that the government announced it ahead of time to gauge the public's reaction. Should there be no anti-Chinese protests in the near future, the policy will most probably come into force. On a positive note, the mere fact that the Foreign Ministry published the press release is a testament to Tokayev's listening state, but only concerning foreign policy.

## CONCLUSION

Reflecting the Soviet legacy, political and policy decision-making in Kazakhstan is top-down authoritarian. During the Nazarbayev era, little attention was paid to popular interests when formulating foreign policy. What mattered the most was the interests of the president's family, clans, and elites. President's advisors liaised between formal and informal institutions, prioritizing the regime's inner circle. Despite the crackdown on Nazarbayev's family and elites in the last few years, the informal institutions of 'old Kazakhstan' remain potent and viable in exerting influence on foreign policy, especially towards Russia and China, which are closely intertwined with political and business interests of Nazarbayev's clan.

At the same time, the rise of Tokayev's power, which began after the January 2022 turmoil, created a 'listening state' doctrine. Despite not bringing any significant democratic changes to domestic affairs, the new approach has placed people at the centre of foreign policy formulation in Kazakhstan. Despite certain foreign policy issues, like relations with China in the context of the oppression of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang, that may lead to societal backlash, the public has largely endorsed Tokayev's multi-vectored foreign policy.

## NOTES

[1] "Ex-Mayor of Almaty Esimov appointed as head of 'Astana EXPO-2017'," Ak Zhayyk, August 10, 2015, <https://azh.kz/en/news/view/6858>.

[2] "Kazakhtelecom and China's largest telecom operator China Mobile International Limited, signed a memorandum of cooperation," Kazakhtelecom, last modified June 28, 2019, <https://telecom.kz/en/news/view/30339>.

[3] "Kazakhstan: Dzhakishiev granted parole after 11 years behind bars," Eurasianet, March 3, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-dzhakishiev-granted-parole-after-11-years-behind-bars>.

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