The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin Heads to Russia's Tightrope-Walking Neighbor Kazakhstan

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March 19, 2015



Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev attends the ruling party congress in Astana, Mar. 11.

As President Vladimir Putin heads to Astana on Friday, Kazakhstan — with Russia's annexation of Crimea still visible in its rearview mirror — is balancing the competing political forces in its orbit by expanding ties with a wide array of partners, pundits told The Moscow Times on Thursday.

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev is set to host his Russian and Belarussian counterparts in Astana to discuss Eurasian economic integration and the ongoing strife in Ukraine, according to his official website. The meeting was postponed last week amid President Vladimir Putin's unexplained 10-day public absence.

Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus are members of the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union, a regional economic alliance founded last year from the vestiges of a customs union of the countries. Russia's economic woes and weakened currency have sent shockwaves through

the post-Soviet space, dampening CIS states' appetite for further economic integration. Political analysts expect that rekindling interest in the Eurasian Economic Union, which recently added Armenia and plans to incorporate Kyrgyzstan, will be high on President Vladimir Putin's agenda for Friday's talks.

Kazakhstan has reportedly been delving into its gold and foreign currency reserves to prevent a drastic devaluation of its national currency, the tenge, and rein in inflation. Nazarbayev also announced a new economic strategy in November focused on mitigating the side effects of Russia's slump.

"Kazakhstan recognizes that it fulfills some of its economic interests by cultivating cordial relations with Russia, but refuses to allow this to be done at the cost of its political independence," said Dosym Satpayev, head of the Almaty-based Kazakhstan Risks Assessment Group think tank. "Kazakhstan's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union is economic, not political. Russia, on the other hand, has no real interest in the Kazakh market. Its interest here is geopolitical."

Separatist Specter

Russia's annexation of Crimea last March and its purported role in supporting pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine prompted "serious debate" within Kazakh society, but sparked few heated objections at the official level, according to Satpayev. The Kazakh authorities' discourse, he said, was mostly focused on portraying Russia as one of the country's key partners.

Kazakhstan abstained from voting on last March's United Nations General Assembly resolution on the territorial integrity of Ukraine in which member states voted not to recognize the Crimean referendum. Armenia and Belarus — both now members of the Eurasian Economic Union — were the only former Soviet republics to join Russia in voting against the resolution.

But the Kazakh authorities' apparent nonchalance has not been transposed to recent policy decisions, suggesting that officials are more concerned with the prospect of a Russian land-grab than they publicly acknowledge.

With ethnic Russians composing nearly one-quarter of its population of 17 million, Kazakhstan has grown wary that separatism could sprout along its 7,000-kilometer border with Russia, the region where most of its Russian population is concentrated.

In July, Nazarbayev approved a new criminal code that harshened punishment for separatist activity. Under Kazakh law, public calls to violate the "unity and integrity" of the country carry up to seven years behind bars. Actions aimed at redrawing its borders are punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

The Kazakh army also conducted a three-day military exercise in January to rehearse repelling "extremist groups, terrorists and separatist organizations," according to a statement by the Defense Ministry. The importance of the drill stemmed from the "current geopolitical changes," the statement said.

The Kazakh government also published a resolution last May outlining a program to resettle ethnic Kazakhs near the country's northern border, a measure interpreted as an attempt to dilute Russian influence there, Kazakh media reported at the time.

Economics Over Politics

Sandwiched between Russia and China, the vast oil-rich Central Asian state has been spoilt for choice when it comes to expanding its trade ties. Its economic prosperity has depended on its ability to assuage Russia, woo the West and seek opportunities on the Asia market, the diversity of its ties enabling it to assert its political divergences with Russia.

"Kazakhstan's multi-vectorial approach to its foreign relations has made it confident," said Vadim Kozyulin, a senior research fellow at the Moscow-based PIR Center think tank. "For Kazakhstan, Russia is an important partner, but one among many others. And now that Russia has fewer allies, the Kremlin appreciates Kazakhstan's relative silence on contentious issues and will have to glaze over any moves it could view as running counter to its wishes."

Despite its membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, Kazakhstan still fosters stronger trade ties with European Union member states. In 2014, the EU accounted for 44.4 percent of Kazakhstan's foreign trade, according to government data. Russia was the country's second most important trading partner, trailing far behind the EU with 15.8 percent of Kazakh foreign trade. China has nearly caught up with Russia, now accounting for 14.4 percent of Kazakhstan's external trade.

In August, Astana rebuffed Moscow's calls to join it in imposing counter-sanctions on the European Union, which would have jeopardized the bulk of Kazakhstan's foreign trade. The country has also toiled to ensure that its participation in the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union does not turn political: Nazarbayev has reiterated that Kazakhstan will withdraw from the bloc if it abandons its economic vocation, and reportedly lobbied for the word "economic" to feature in the union's official name.

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