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# Kazakhstan

## Overview

Kazakhstan, a U.S. partner in areas such as counterterrorism, regional security, and nuclear nonproliferation, is a strategically situated country with significant hydrocarbon and mineral resources. It shares borders with Russia to the north and the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China) to the east, and three Central Asian neighbors to the south (see **Figure 1**). Although sparsely populated, Kazakhstan is the world's ninth-largest country by land area and the most economically developed country in Central Asia. Previously a republic of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan became independent in 1991. Since then, the authoritarian government has introduced market reforms, developed the energy sector, and moved to diversify its economy. Following unprecedented unrest in January 2022, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev moved to consolidate power and announced a reform program aimed at creating a "New Kazakhstan."

Some Members of Congress have expressed interest in expanding U.S. engagement with Kazakhstan and supporting its political reform process; other Members have expressed concern about Kazakhstan's human rights record. Kazakhstan pursues a "multi-vector" foreign policy, seeking to balance relations with major powers while actively participating in international organizations. In light of the Russia-Ukraine war and related U.S. and international sanctions on Russia, Kazakhstan has sought to further diversify its diplomatic and trade relationships.

## Political Background

Since 2022, reforms introduced by Tokayev have aimed to restructure Kazakhstan's political system and annul the privileged position of former President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who held office for nearly three decades until his 2019 resignation. While authorities present ongoing reforms as moving the country in a more democratic direction, some analysts express skepticism as to the degree of political pluralism Kazakhstan's government may allow.

Tokayev, seen as Nazarbayev's hand-picked successor, won a snap presidential election in 2019. Nazarbayev maintained significant power until January 2022, when initially peaceful demonstrations over economic issues became the largest and most violent protests in Kazakhstan's history, leaving over 200 dead. Many analysts contend that figures associated with Nazarbayev took advantage of genuine popular protests to pursue an intra-elite power struggle, with the alleged aim of sidelining Tokayev. As Tokayev moved to control the unrest, he sought assistance from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Russia-led security alliance to which Kazakhstan belongs. In the first deployment in the organization's history, a CSTO mission of roughly 2,500 mostly Russian troops spent about two weeks in Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan held a constitutional referendum in June 2022, a move some analysts see as part of Tokayev's efforts to reduce his predecessor's influence. Voters approved changes curtailing some presidential powers and removing mentions of Nazarbayev from the constitution. Tokayev said the constitutional changes would shift Kazakhstan from a "super-presidential form of government to a presidential republic with a strong parliament." Following additional legislation extending the presidential term from five years to seven and establishing a one-term limit, a snap presidential election was held in November 2022, two years ahead of schedule, with Tokayev winning 81% of the vote. Observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) deemed the electoral contest as "lacking competitiveness." In March 2023 snap parliamentary elections, the OSCE noted "elements of competitiveness," but also flagged "significant procedural irregularities."

**Figure 1. Map of Kazakhstan**



Source: CRS.

**Human Rights and Civil Society.** According to the U.S. State Department, human rights issues in Kazakhstan include problems with the independence of the judiciary; restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom; interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; restrictions on political participation; and government corruption. The nongovernmental organization Freedom House assesses that "authorities have consistently marginalized or imprisoned genuine opposition figures" and rates the country "Not Free."

Economic inequality and a perceived lack of government accountability have fueled grassroots discontent in recent years. In 2011, protests by oil workers in the western town of Zhanaozen turned violent, leaving at least 15 demonstrators dead and dozens injured after police opened fire. In 2016, large-scale protests broke out against proposed changes to the country's land code, which critics feared would lead to a Chinese takeover of agricultural

land. Since 2019, there have been multiple demonstrations by women protesting a perceived lack of state support for large families. Nazarbayev's 2019 resignation and the subsequent snap presidential election catalyzed further protests and calls for transition to a parliamentary system.

#### Kazakhstan at a Glance

**Land area:** 2,699,700 sq. km.; 1.6 times the size of Alaska

**Population:** 20.3 million (2025 est.)

**Ethnicities:** 71% Kazakh, 14.9% Russian, 3.3% Uzbek, 1.9% Ukrainian, 1.5% Uyghur, 7.4% Other (2024)

**Languages:** Kazakh (74%, state language), Russian (72%, officially recognized) (2021)

**GDP/GDP per capita (2023):** \$262.64 billion/\$38,515 (PPP)

*Data from the World Bank and Kazakhstan's Bureau of National Statistics.*

## Economy

Kazakhstan is Central Asia's most economically developed country. Major exports include oil, copper, ferroalloys, uranium, and wheat. Dependence on oil exports renders Kazakhstan vulnerable to external shocks. Kazakhstan is a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, and its economy is closely tied to that of Russia. The World Bank estimates GDP growth of 4% in 2024, with 4.7% growth projected for 2025, fueled in part by increased oil production and export.

**Energy.** Kazakhstan is a major energy exporter, producing significant volumes of crude oil, natural gas, and coal. The country is estimated to have the world's 12<sup>th</sup>-largest oil reserves and 16<sup>th</sup>-largest natural gas reserves. Kazakhstan's oil and gas resources attract investment from U.S., European, Russian, and PRC partners. According to the International Monetary Fund, hydrocarbons accounted for 15% of GDP and over 53% of exports in 2023.

Kazakhstan holds 12% of the world's uranium and has led world uranium production since 2009. In 2022, a joint venture between state-owned nuclear energy company Kazatomprom and China General Nuclear Power Corporation began producing nuclear fuel in Kazakhstan. In a 2024 referendum, voters approved the construction of a new nuclear power plant in Kazakhstan.

**Diversification.** Kazakhstan's government aims to diversify its economy away from hydrocarbons. Kazakhstan is implementing transport and logistics development and modernization projects with neighboring countries, mainly aligned with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The government seeks to turn Kazakhstan into a regional financial hub with the creation of the Astana International Finance Center and the Astana International Exchange. The U.S. Department of Commerce has identified agriculture as an area of opportunity for U.S. firms as Kazakhstan seeks to reduce its dependence on extractive industries. In 2023, Tokayev announced a "new paradigm for Kazakhstan's economic development" focused on developing the manufacturing sector, economic diversification, bolstering domestic entrepreneurship, modernizing and expanding the

mining and agricultural sectors, and realizing Kazakhstan's full potential in transport and logistics, among other goals.

## Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations

**Multi-Vector Foreign Policy.** Although Kazakhstan seeks to avoid alignment with any one power, the United States and Kazakhstan have developed a strong and wide-ranging relationship, even as Kazakhstan maintains close economic, political, and military ties with Russia. Some analysts believe that Kazakhstan is distancing itself from Russia in light of the war in Ukraine, while others note continuing diplomatic and economic ties. The U.S. Department of the Treasury has imposed sanctions on multiple Kazakhstan-based entities for facilitating Russian sanctions evasion. Kazakhstan has avoided endorsing Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine, and Kazakh officials have expressed support for Ukraine's territorial integrity.

China surpassed Russia as Kazakhstan's primary trade partner in 2023. Kazakhstan is seen as a key country in the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt—one of the main corridors of the BRI—and has received significant financing from PRC entities to construct transport and energy infrastructure. Many analysts assess that economic ties with China make the country's government wary of antagonizing Beijing. In some segments of Kazakhstani society, there is resentment of Chinese migrant laborers as well as China's repression of Muslims—including ethnic Kazakhs—in Xinjiang.

**Counterterrorism and Security.** An estimated 150-600 Kazakh citizens reportedly fought for the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq. Because many of them traveled to IS-controlled territories with their families, experts assess that the total number of IS-associated Kazakhs is likely closer to 1,000. Between 2019 and 2023, Kazakhstan repatriated over 700 of its citizens from Syria, primarily women and children, with logistical support from the United States. Kazakhstan participates in the U.S.-led C5+1 regional initiative, which has a counterterrorism component.

**Nonproliferation.** When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Kazakhstan was left with some 1,400 nuclear warheads on its territory; by 1995 it had transferred them all to Russia. Kazakhstan also dismantled Soviet nuclear testing infrastructure. The United States provided \$240 million in assistance to Kazakhstan's denuclearization efforts through the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction program, and the two countries continue to cooperate on nuclear security.

**U.S. Foreign Assistance.** U.S.-funded programs in Kazakhstan have sought to support "Kazakhstan's increasing efforts to exercise its own sovereignty and independence, while adopting a wave of reforms based on President Tokayev's vision that addresses the political, social and economic needs of its citizens," according to the State Department's FY2025 budget request. Another focus of U.S. assistance to Kazakhstan has been security cooperation. The Biden Administration requested \$19.2 million in appropriations for aid to Kazakhstan for FY2024 and allocated an estimated \$24.5 million in FY2023.

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