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‘Connecting East and West’

Kazakhstan’s Deputy Foreign Minister Roman Vassilenko on the country’s role as a key transit hub for global trade and its relations with the EU

In November 2024, the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, visited France. Can we talk today about a strengthening of Kazakhstan’s relations with the EU?

President Tokayev’s state visit to France serves as unequivocal evidence of the high level of bilateral cooperation already achieved between the two countries. Astana and Paris collaborate closely on the international stage, jointly promoting the principles of peace and sustainable development within multilateral platforms. Notably, on 3 December 2024, the presidents of the two countries jointly presided over the ‘One Water Summit’ on the sidelines of COP16 on desertification.

France is also one of Kazakhstan’s largest trade and investment partners. Since 2005, French investment in Kazakhstan’s economy has totalled $19.5 billion. Today, more than 200 companies and joint ventures with French capital are operating successfully in the country. During President Tokayev’s recent visit to France, 36 agreements were signed with a total value of $2.2 billion. Joint infrastructure and transport projects could become new growth drivers for the economies of both countries. Shared interests include cooperation in agriculture, water resource management, energy, including renewable energy, extraction and processing of rare earth elements, industrial collaboration, digital development (including artificial intelligence), as well as cultural and humanitarian projects.

In addition to France, the Kazakh president has made several visits and maintained contacts with European partners, including the leaders of Germany, Italy, Hungary, the Netherlands, Croatia and Greece. Strengthening relations with these and other EU partners positively impacts our cooperation with the Old World.

How do you assess the prospects for deepening economic partnership

with the EU, given the current sanctions regimes and tensions? Is there any interest in cooperation on the part of European countries?

Despite the sanctions and the current geopolitical situation, there is mutual interest between Kazakhstan and the EU countries in deepening their economic partnership. This is reflected in the increasing frequency of high-level visits.

The European Union is Kazakhstan's largest trading partner, accounting for approximately 30 per cent of the country's foreign trade. In the first nine months of 2024, trade turnover increased by 23 per cent, reaching $36.8 billion. During meetings between President Tokayev and his European counterparts, commercial agreements worth more than $10 billion were signed in 2024. Key areas of investment cooperation between the EU and Kazakhstan include agriculture, transport connectivity, pharmaceuticals and energy. Our comprehensive partnership is strengthened by significant mutual interests and agreements in promising and strategically important sectors, including green hydrogen production and the extraction of critical raw materials, especially as 19 of the 34 CRMs classified as such by the EU are mined in Kazakhstan.

What are the difficulties in establishing cooperation with the EU?

Astana and Brussels share a mutual interest in deepening relations and fostering comprehensive cooperation, leaving no room for misunderstandings. The Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union, which encompasses 29 areas, provides a robust political and legal foundation for advancing dialogue and further expanding trade and investment ties. Our shared goal is to maintain and build on the positive momentum of cooperation that we have achieved over the past 30 plus years, but especially in the last three years.

What is Kazakhstan's role in the development of the transport corridor between Europe and Asia?

Kazakhstan's strategic geographic location and its role as a key transit hub for global trade routes underscore its status as a middle power. The country's involvement in China's Belt and Road Initiative and the EU's Global Gateway project positions it as a critical link between East and West. Kazakhstan's investments in infrastructure, particularly in transport and logistics, have established it as a major player in the global supply chain. Notably, Kazakhstan accounts for 80 per cent of all continental traffic between China and Europe.

We are investing in expanding our ports on the Caspian Sea, such as

the Aktau and Kuryk ports, to boost their capacity and efficiency. These ports are vital nodes along the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), also known as the Middle Corridor, giving Kazakhstan an additional outlet for exporting oil, minerals and other goods to European and world markets. The expansion of these ports is part of Kazakhstan's strategy for the development of logistics infrastructure.

The role and prospects of the Middle Corridor as an important alternative to traditional routes amid global geopolitical changes are evident. Overall, the volume of cargo transported through the TITR has quadrupled in the last three years, reflecting growing demand for this route. In response, Kazakhstan is committed to ensuring high-quality supply and service. We expect cargo traffic to accelerate to 500 000 TEUs per year by 2030 and aim to establish a transit trade hub connecting the markets of Europe and Asia while linking the Eurasian Economic Union with the Belt and Road Initiative.

Several railway projects spanning a total of 1 300 km along the Kazakh section of the Trans-Caspian Corridor are currently underway. We are actively collaborating with PSA Singapore, a leading international port operator, to enhance Kazakhstan's transport potential. Additionally, a digital transport corridor has been developed in partnership with Singapore's Global DTC to streamline the exchange of transportation documents.

All these measures contribute to the expansion of the geography of transportation and integrate our transport corridor with the world's largest hubs. Kazakhstan views all global initiatives promoted by China, the EU and the Group of Seven as complementary and therefore intends to continue cooperating with all partners to shift from being landlocked to landlinked, positioning itself as a key player on the Eurasian continent, and connecting East and West.

Is the issue of visa liberalisation for Kazakh citizens being discussed with the EU? What are the prospects?

To begin with, Kazakhstan has been providing visa-free travel to citizens of all EU countries since 2017. Undoubtedly, we also place significant emphasis on simplifying visa requirements for our citizens. In May 2023, an agreement was reached to commence official consultations on the simplification of the visa regime for Kazakh citizens with EU member states. Internal discussions among EU member states are currently underway. We look forward to the official launch of negotiations on this matter and on the draft agreement on readmission in 2025. It is important to realise that easing the visa regime for our citizens will serve our shared interests

and strengthen the ties between Kazakhstan and the EU even further.

How does Kazakhstan balance between major geopolitical players such as Russia, China and the United States?

First and foremost, Kazakhstan pursues a pragmatic and balanced foreign policy, focusing on the development of equal and mutually beneficial relations with all nations. Our primary objectives remain ensuring security and stability along our borders, enhancing Kazakhstan's role as an active participant in regional and global politics, and safeguarding and promoting national interests abroad.

Kazakhstan has established strategic relations with the fraternal states of Central Asia, a strategic partnership and alliance with Russia, a comprehensive strategic partnership with China aimed at bolstering trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian ties, an expanded strategic partnership with the United States, and enhanced partnership and cooperation with the European Union and its member states.

Kazakhstan's foreign policy, grounded in equal cooperation and friendship with all global economic centres, underpins the stable and progressive development of our economy. Thanks to our peaceful approach, we are regarded by all nations as a reliable partner.

Does Kazakhstan see itself as a mediator in international conflicts?

Middle powers have the capacity to contribute to global governance and conflict resolution without wielding major military power. Kazakhstan exemplifies this role by acting as a neutral host and, if asked, a mediator in regional conflicts, showcasing its ability to influence both global and regional agendas. An example of Kazakhstan's proactive foreign policy is its efforts to help promote peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. A notable recent development is the agreement of both countries to hold bilateral talks in Kazakhstan, a testament to its constructive role in regional diplomacy.

Kazakhstan's approach is firmly rooted in the fundamental norms and principles of international law, as outlined in the UN Charter, with particular emphasis on the inviolability of state borders and the territorial integrity of states. This commitment reflects Kazakhstan's strategy of fostering peaceful development both in the region and globally.

What steps are you taking to strengthen the role of your country at the international level?

Kazakhstan is recognised globally as a peaceful and progressive state.

In its foreign policy, the country values its reputation as a reliable partner and active participant in international organisations, demonstrated by its chairmanship of six international organisations in 2024, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Organisation of Turkic States, and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, among others. Astana's foreign policy is reinforced by domestic reforms aimed at fostering political and socio-economic development to build an inclusive, accountable, and competitive society, or, as we say, a Just and Fair Kazakhstan. We actively contribute to strengthening international security and promoting dialogue among nations through offering our 'good office' as hosts for talks and peacekeeping efforts.

In a nutshell, Kazakhstan is a country that lives in peace with itself, its neighbours and the world.



Roman Vassilenko

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