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Peacemaker wanted

Kazakhstan maintains good relations with Russia and Ukraine. The country would be perfectly suited to mediate negotiations and end bloodshed

The war in Ukraine has presented countries that have close political, economic and historical ties with Russia with a difficult task: On the one hand, they cannot sever their relations with Moscow; on the other, they do not want to fall out of favour internationally. Among the countries that have largely succeeded in this balancing act so far is Kazakhstan.

Since 2022, leaders from all over the world have visited the capital Astana - from Chinese President Xi Jinping to Turkish President Recep Erdoğan and French President Emmanuel Macron. Kazakh President Qassym Shomart Toqayev is seen as a reformer in the West and as a reliable ally in the Kremlin. As recently as the beginning of March 2024, Moscow and Astana reaffirmed their commitment to comprehensively strengthening the strategic partnership between the two countries. Might Astana's ability to skilfully balance in the midst of enormous geopolitical tensions eventually lead to a mediating role?

Walking a tight rope

Ukraine is a vivid example of the consequences a conflict with Russia can have for the neighbouring states. Unlike other countries in the region, Kazakhstan shares a border with the Russian Federation - at 7 644 kilometres, it is the longest continuous land border in the world. Through its membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), Kazakhstan is a military ally of Moscow, with 90 per cent of all arms imports coming from Russia. In addition, Russia not only rents the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, but also three military training areas where around 900 Russian soldiers are stationed. The two countries also have close economic and trade relations: Both are members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Russia is one of the five main investors in Kazakhstan, the majority of Kazakh imports (27 per cent) come from the neighbouring country and, finally, around 80 per cent of Kazakh oil is exported abroad via the pipeline that runs through Russia.

Given such well-established relations with Moscow in strategically important areas, Kazakhstan's position on the war in Ukraine appears surprisingly independent. From the outset, Astana has repeatedly emphasised the need for a diplomatic solution to the conflict and reiterated that Ukraine's territorial integrity must be preserved. Since February 2022, the Kazakh president has spoken to his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy three times on the phone. At the International Economic Forum in St. Petersburg in June 2022, he described - in the presence of Vladimir Putin - the so-called 'People's Republics' of Luhansk (LNR) and Donetsk (DNR) as 'quasi-state territories' and emphasised that Kazakhstan has never recognised such entities and never will. During his official visit to Germany in September 2023, Toqayev expressed Kazakhstan's intention to comply with the Western sanctions imposed on Russia, although he later had to clarify that his country simply did not have any goods that were affected by sanctions.

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Astana's stance is not only the result of the multi-vector foreign policy it has practised for thirty years, which is based on pragmatism and aims to 'win friends instead of make enemies'. Two other factors also influence this position. Firstly, Kazakhstan is a multinational state with a Ukrainian diaspora that has developed since the 19th century and is now the fourth largest in the country after the Russian, Uzbek and Uyghur diasporas. Consequently, the primary task of the Kazakh leadership is to maintain inter-ethnic peace and social stability. The multinational country has not experienced any civil wars or ethnically coloured conflicts since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This explains the relatively harsh reaction of the Kazakh authorities to radical public statements about the war in Ukraine. In October 2022, Astana called on Kyiv to replace the Ukrainian ambassador to Kazakhstan, Petro Vrublevsky, who had previously said in an interview that the more Ukrainians were killed now, the less Russians the next generation of Ukrainians would have to kill. And in January 2023, MP Azamat Abildayev was expelled from the Kazakh party Ak Zhol after expressing his support for Russia in a local radio interview.

Another issue concerns the statements of some Russian politicians, which have been causing irritation in Kazakhstan for years. In 2020, for example, the comment by Duma deputy Vyacheslav Nikonov that Kazakhstan's current territory was 'a great gift from Russia and the Soviet Union' sparked a wave of indignation. The Kazakh Foreign Ministry pointed out that such provocative attacks by Russian politicians were damaging bilateral relations. However disconcerting the statements of some Russian politicians may be, Kazakhstan's leadership asserts Russia's special foreign policy position due to its geographical proximity, historical and economic ties and security considerations: for example, with the initiative to establish an international organisation for the Russian language or the emphasis on friendship with Russia, which 'should be absolutely permanent and eternal'.

Untapped potential

And although Kazakhstan has a comparatively independent position, it emphasises the need for a diplomatic solution. According to Deputy Foreign Minister Roman Vasilenko, the war in Ukraine is a very close and tragic conflict for Kazakhstan, where 3.5 million Russians and 250 000 ethnic Ukrainians live out of a total population of 20 million. Kazakhstan is therefore endeavouring to do its utmost to end the bloodshed and help resolve the conflict. Even former Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who studied and lived in Ukraine, wanted to contribute to the normalisation of Russian-Ukrainian relations. In 2019, he proposed organising a meeting between the Russian and Ukrainian presidents in Kazakhstan. At the time, Moscow responded to the proposal from Astana by saying that it favoured talks in the Normandy format. As this format no longer exists today, it would be worth considering involving Kazakhstan's expertise in mediating international conflict situations to a greater extent.

Kazakhstan, for example, moderated the talks on the Iranian nuclear programme in the city of Almaty twice in 2013: The first round of talks took place in February 2013 and were attended by five permanent members of the UN Security Council as well as Germany, EU countries and representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The second round took place in April of that year between representatives of the E3+3 (the UK, Germany, France, China, Russia, the US) and Iran. Four years later, Astana, the capital, provided a platform for more than twenty rounds of talks on settling the Syrian conflict with the participation of the Syrian government and opposition as well as Russia, Turkey and Iran. The twenty-first round took place in the Kazakh capital in January 2024. The fact that the exchange has been maintained for years shows that it has

served its purpose. The format made it possible to use diplomacy and dialogue to find a basis among all parties to the conflict to look for solutions. Concrete measures such as the creation of de-escalation zones, the cessation of fighting and the improvement of the humanitarian situation were also discussed in this format.

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Kazakhstan is also an active member of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which also makes it credible in the eyes of European countries. In 2010, Kazakhstan held the chairmanship and organised an OSCE summit - the first in eleven years. The 'Astana Declaration' signed at the meeting constitutes the first and so far, only OSCE consensus document to be adopted by OSCE heads of state or government in this century. In this context, Kazakhstan's earlier involvement in efforts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict in Ukraine also speaks in favour of its potential role as a mediator: since 2014, it has been involved in the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission both in terms of personnel (with its own observers) and financially (with a voluntary contribution of USD 40 000). In addition, the international experience of the current President, as a professional diplomat, former UN Deputy Secretary-General, Director-General of the UN Office in Geneva and Secretary-General of the UN Conference on Disarmament is a favourable prerequisite for Kazakhstan to play a constructive role in the search for a way out of the war in Ukraine.

A peace-making role in the war in Ukraine would also be supported by a large part of the Kazakh population - in the last survey to date in May 2023, 60 per cent of respondents described their position in this conflict as 'neutral'. Since the beginning of the war, most respondents have also been in favour of Kazakhstan adhering to neutrality or acting as a mediator. After all, the main interest of Astana, Kazakhstan's political and economic elites and its population is to maintain political and social stability and guarantee national security. For this to succeed, further escalation must be prevented and the war in Ukraine ended as quickly as possible. Kazakhstan's historical, political and cultural proximity to both Russia and Ukraine, its genuine interest in national and regional stability and its existing experience in resolving international conflicts make the

country a potential player in possible negotiations between Russia and Ukraine. Kazakhstan has already expressed its willingness to do so on several occasions.



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