

Anti-Chinese Protests and the Kazakh State



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Protests began anew in Zhanaozen at the beginning of September of this year and, as before, reached across the breadth of the nation. This time they are against the increasing influence of China (PRC) and are part of the global backlash against growing Chinese investment. In particular, the activists are concerned that the PRC is planning to move over 50 outdated factories to the region. Given the Chinese environmental record, there is fear these will worsen an already bad environment; likewise, given the Chinese record on sending Chinese laborers to work in their foreign factories, there is a fear of an influx of Chinese citizens into Zhanaozen. The Kazakh government responded that these rumors are unfounded, although they admitted they are discussing investment projects with the PRC.

These protests are eerily similar to a series of actions that spread in 2016 against land sales to foreign investors, in particular to China, which has spent much of the last two decades buying

up property, as well as investing in industry, around the world. Those protests too spread to Zhanaozen, and the government was largely unprepared for their nation-wide scale. While these protests were again based largely on rumors, they represented the Kazakh people's growing frustration that their voices were not being heard by their own government. Some were also concerned their government was for sale to the largest outside bidder, in this case to China.

China is a convenient bogey-man for the government and the protesters alike: the latter are able to voice their frustrations with their own government, without directly challenging it, while the former are able to give an outlet to Kazakhs frustrated by their lack of ability to effect change in their nation. However, by directly challenging Chinese influence, the protesters are challenging those Kazakhs who may have succumbed to PRC influence. The demand that President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, a Sinologist by training, cancel his September trip to China – something he refused to do – makes this challenge more direct. The Chinese ambassador to Kazakhstan, showing a complete lack of understanding of organic protest movements, blamed this “nonsense” on third-party forces, much as the PRC has blamed the months-long protests in Hong Kong on a joint Taiwan-US conspiracy.

These protests have put the Kazakh government in a difficult position. Tokayev, in his State of the Nation Address at the beginning of September, promised to allow public protests in Kazakhstan. Mature democracies know how to handle such events because the right to assemble is just as engrained in the citizenry as is the fact that, while they might be able to affect change, they will not topple a duly-elected government. This, however, is not yet the deal the state and citizenry have made in Central Asia: protests that started small in neighboring Kyrgyzstan brought down governments in 2005 and 2010. This demonstrates the danger that even tiny movements, which can quickly grow, have for a state with a less mature democracy. Looking back, it is easy to link the Jeltoqsan protests in Almaty in December 1986 to the end of the Soviet Union five years later.

Tokayev also needs to be wary of alienating China. China has been a major source of investment, important as oil prices remain soft. Even high Chinese demand for energy cannot guarantee a steady stream of income in current conditions. However, for average Kazakhs, there is understandable anger. In addition to recent concerns, Kazakhs have long had the sense they are a dumping ground for shoddy Chinese merchandise, which is sold in markets throughout the nation. Thus, China does not have a positive reputation in Kazakhstan. For Kazakhstan, as for much of the rest of the world, it would be difficult to de-couple from the PRC in any significant amount or quickly, although it could be possible in the long term, with proper leadership and a clearly articulated plan. A greater challenge for Kazakhstan is that, as a land-

locked nation, it could lose key access to the outside world, a concern other countries around the world would not face if they choose to stand up to China.

Kazakhs are also increasingly upset about the treatment of the Uyghurs, their Turkic brethren, in neighboring Xinjiang. At least 10,000 ethnic Kazakhs are among the million who have been interned in concentration camps in order to eradicate “thought viruses” among the Kazakh and Uyghur populations, as the Chinese government itself stated in recently leaked documents.¹ Some prisoners were released from these camps, only to be retaken shortly after. Others have been returned to Kazakhstan. Activists in Kazakhstan have been silenced, with Serikzhan Bilash being tried for “inciting racial hatred” for the simple act of demanding China release all Kazakhstani Uyghurs held in China. The Kazakh government only reluctantly raises the issue, while Beijing thanks for them for their “help and support” with the “re-education process.” With the commitment to allowing protests to grow – and there have since been several additional and permitted protests in favor of rights activists, issues of women’s equality, political prisoners, and debt relief since early September – what will happen when the Kazakh people press the Uyghur issue even further? Allowing protests with a nationalist bent might be in the interest of the government to distract from other problems, but protests in the name of nationalism have great potential to spiral out of control rapidly.

These protests also represent, as they do elsewhere, a difference between the elites and the average citizen. The former, whether in think tanks, business, or government, are often feted in China, shown only the “good,” and, by saying largely positive things, guarantee themselves a place on the PRC’s self-admitted “white list,” which allows them multiple-year/multiple-entry visas. Many are also given lucrative grants or other types of funding to conduct and disseminate their research. These individuals talk exclusively of the danger of challenging China in any way. The latter, who are not beneficiaries of such dog-and-pony shows, are more wary of China’s growing influence and may be willing to pay a significant economic and political price to stand up to the PRC, as hundreds of millions in the West did successfully for decades against the Soviet Union, another totalitarian state bent on restructuring the world according to its own illiberal vision.

Although the protests against China have since waned, the issue has not gone away. Two Chinese citizens, both ethnically Kazakh, were caught illegally crossing the border from Xinjiang on 1 October, having been released from one of the over 500 previously identified camps. The Chinese would like them back. The Kazakh government instead arrested and

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html>

charged them with crossing the border illegally on 14 October. However, they almost certainly wish that the issue would quietly go away. It likely will not, as this news is common knowledge in Kazakhstan, and the government cannot afford to alienate their own citizens further, even at the risk of angering China. Plus, returning them would seem to violate the *Oralman* policy, which has encouraged all ethnic Kazakhs to come home and build a new Kazakh nation. How this concludes will likely show how relations with China will proceed in the years ahead.

In 2014, then-President Nursultan Nazarbayev made a defining choice when Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened the existence of a post-Nazarbayev Kazakhstan. Suddenly Kazakh Eurasianism, combined with their own brand of nascent nationalism, began to play a large role throughout the country. This included Nazarbayev extending Kazakhstan's national history back some 400 years. The question now is whether Tokayev will take a similar stand against China and, of course, whether Nazarbayev, in his role of [Elbasy](#), will allow him, compel him, or tell him to back off and let China do as China will do.

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