

OPINION

# Kazakhstan: Trapped between Russia and the West

As the geopolitical split in Eurasia widens, the country's balancing act will be a hard feat to pull off.



Kazakhstan' President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev | Mikhail Klimentyev/Sputnik/AFP via Getty Images

BY NARGIS KASSENOVA

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Kazakhstan is trying to position itself as an open, entrepreneurial nation — one that's a good

neighbor and useful partner for President Vladimir Putin's isolated Russia, but also one that isn't closed off from the rest of the world.

But as the geopolitical division between Moscow and the West continues to widen, this will certainly be a hard feat to pull off.

The difficulty of this task was on clear display this month, as Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev reassured European Union leaders they could depend on him to help the 27-nation bloc overcome its energy crisis. However, just the next day, a court in Novorossiysk — Russia's Black Sea port — ordered the month-long closure of an oil pipeline coming from Kazakhstan, which sends supplies to Europe.

Ostensibly, the shutdown order was in response to violations of oil spill regulations. However, when Tokayev later instructed the government at an urgent Cabinet meeting to prioritize the development of the Trans-Caspian corridor, bypassing Russia for Kazakh oil, the court revised its decision, substituting the suspension with a fine instead. This

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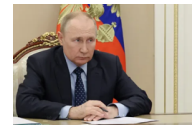
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reversal has now raised suspicions that the court's actions, as well as earlier disruptions caused by damage to the loading facilities from a storm in March and the search for World War II mines in the port aquatoria in June, were politically motivated and part of a sanctions tit-for-tat between the West and Russia over the war in Ukraine.

The challenge facing Tokayev was also vividly demonstrated at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June. As the only notable foreign leader to attend the forum in person, sitting next to Putin was a clear show of solidarity for Tokayev, but the plenary session itself revealed the pair to be at odds.



▲ Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev (L) speaks with Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) during their meeting at Moscow's Kremlin | Mikhail Klimentyev/Sputnik/AFP via Getty Images

While Putin's Russia is politically and economically closing, the young Kazakh country is determined to stay open, and this clash will only continue in the weeks and months to come. Assuming Russia's "lonely" period lasts for several years, however, what can Kazakhstan do for itself, Eurasia and the world?

Ironically, the two countries' drastically different paths are chosen in pursuit of the same goal — strengthening national sovereignty.

Putin made sovereignty the main theme of his lengthy speech at the plenary, using the word nine times. He complained that the United States and countries of the "golden billion" treat all the

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others as colonies, considering them second-rate. And he insisted that Russia should take care of its sovereignty in a holistic way — defending political sovereignty and national identity, and strengthening economic, financial, technological self-sufficiency and independence.

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Tokayev's remarks at the event were shorter and less emotional. He calmly and politely reaffirmed Kazakhstan's position of favoring the principle of territorial integrity over the that of self-determination, as well as the non-recognition of the quasi-state territories of Donetsk and Luhansk. He noted that the preference for self-determination could lead to the emergence of hundreds new countries, resulting in chaos — which could be seen as a polite invitation for Russian elites to imagine the consequences of such a development for their multiethnic country.

However, Tokayev's other remarks, less noticed by international audiences, are also important for further understanding the Kazakh political elite's concept of sovereignty and their ongoing divergence with Russia. He spoke of international cooperation and making the country attractive for investment. He stressed the impossibility and futility of attempts to be self-sufficient. And he also noted the importance of ongoing reforms in Kazakhstan, aimed at making the system more inclusive and just, and the country more stable and capable to compete.

So, what can come of this divergence?

As Kazakhstan tries to manage relations with Russia, balancing its openness with its “strategic ally’s” anti-Western isolationism, tensions seem inevitable. And the risks for the country are considerably high.

In the immediate future, strict compliance with sanctions and the pursuit of stronger relations with the West could prompt Moscow’s irritation and even wrath. But attempts to accommodate Russian interests could also create the ground for secondary sanctions.

In the medium and longer term, a brooding and impoverished Russia that is going through rough times — as a result of putting itself in a geopolitical trap — isn’t good news for the region either. The negative impact is likely to be multifaceted and ultimately hard to predict.

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At present, Kazakhstan is focused on containing the damage by recalibrating its foreign policy. It’s also very busy exploring new opportunities that are opening up. In St. Petersburg, for example, Tokayev said the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) should adopt a more proactive and flexible trade policy toward Asian and Middle Eastern markets, and that Kazakhstan could play the role of a buffer market in this new setting. He also wishes to develop better linkages between the EEU and China’s Belt and Road Initiative too.

As can be seen, Kazakhstan is trying to benefit from the reorientation of trade routes, but in a way that Russia sees benefit too. It’s positioning itself as an open entrepreneurial merchant nation, a good neighbor and useful partner.

For this balancing act to work, however, the country needs a buy-in from all key parties, which isn’t going to be easy — although, if goodwill is shown all round, it’s still not impossible.

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