

Russia's Involvement in Kazakhstan's Crisis Could Have Wide Implications

Experts believe Moscow risks being sucked into neighboring unrest and having to manage strategic instability on two fronts.

By [Felix Light](#)

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Russian troops leaving for Kazakhstan on Thursday morning. **Russian Defence Ministry/TASS**

Russia's deployment of troops as part of a military alliance to put down growing protest in neighboring Kazakhstan will have major ramifications for Moscow's foreign and domestic policy, experts told the Moscow Times on Thursday.

"For now, this is less an armed intervention than a police operation," said Andrei Kortunov, head of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), a Kremlin-linked think tank.

"But if it drags on, consequences for Russia could mount up."

The deployment of 3,000 Russian paratroopers came after Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart

Tokayev made a formal request for assistance to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a post-Soviet military alliance led by Russia.

Alongside Russia, CSTO member states Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan sent troop contingents to Kazakhstan, an important regional power with vast energy resources and a founding member of the Eurasian Economic Union, a Russia-led regional trade bloc.

Tokayev said that intervention was necessary to counter a “terrorist threat” after protests against a fuel price hike spread nationwide, with demonstrators in Kazakhstan’s commercial capital Almaty seizing weapons, setting government buildings alight and shutting down the country’s main international airport.

Kazakh media have reported that at least twelve police officers have been killed during the unrest, with “dozens” more fatalities reported.

On Thursday morning, footage circulated on social media showed Kazakh army units exchanging gunfire with armed opponents as they attempted to retake Almaty.

For many Russian observers, the sudden explosion of unrest in a country otherwise known for political stability, underlines a sense that intervention — which until only hours before Tokayev’s plea for help had been [sworn off](#) by the Kremlin — was unavoidable.

“I don’t think Russia had any choice but to intervene,” said RIAC’s Kortunov, who pointed to a 2020 revolution in Kazakhstan’s Central Asian neighbor Kyrgyzstan, and last year’s Taliban takeover in Afghanistan.

“Given how violent the unrest was and how unstable the region is, this seems like it was the only option,” he added. “But it’s important that this is a short, time-limited operation and that we don’t get sucked in.”

Related article: [Russia-Led Troops Sent to Kazakhstan as 'Dozens' Killed in Unrest](#)

The crisis in Kazakhstan comes at an awkward time for Russia.

With tensions with the West on the rise amid a months-long military buildup on the Ukrainian border and fears of war, Russia has moved westward many of the units it usually deploys in Siberia and the Urals, along its frontier with Kazakhstan.

As reports of unrest spread across Kazakhstan on Wednesday, parts of the pro-Kremlin media labeled the events a “Maidan”, referring to the 2014 revolution in Ukraine that touched off that country’s break with Russia, and accused the West of contriving the disturbances ahead of high-stakes U.S.-Russia talks this month.

Tokayev likewise claimed that his country was under “external attack” from “bands of terrorists.”

However, with Russia’s armed forces heavily engaged along the Ukrainian border, and much of its diplomatic capacity given over to ongoing talks with the U.S. on security guarantees, the Kazakhstan crisis represents an unwelcome turn of events for Moscow.

“The Kremlin needs to divide [its] attention ... and manage strategic instability on two fronts,” Alexander Baunov, a Russian foreign policy analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank, [wrote](#) on Twitter.

For some experts, the biggest potential risk is Russia’s getting sucked into Kazakhstan’s domestic disputes.

Though Kazakhstan has a large Russian majority, and the country’s north has sometimes been the object of irredentist dreams, Russo-Kazakh relations have been generally friendly since the end of the U.S.S.R.

With Russia now assuming a leading role in underwriting Kazakhstan’s government, RIAC’s Kortunov fears an outpouring of Kazakh nationalism and disruption of the country’s fragile internal ethnic balance.

Previous Russian interventions in post-Soviet countries have seen friendly states take sharp anti-Russian turns, Kortunov noted.

“There’s a real chance that we could see the rise of anti-Russian sentiment in Kazakhstan, along the lines of Ukraine or Georgia,” he said.

Domestic risks

The crisis in Kazakhstan is also likely to impinge on Russia’s domestic politics.

Though both countries have been largely stable under long-standing authoritarian regimes, widespread economic frustrations and inequality have eaten away at both governments’ popular standing.

In Russia, as in Kazakhstan, unpopular socio-economic reforms including a 2018 pension age increase, and wage stagnation have driven down the president’s once sky-high approval rating.

A recent Levada Center poll [showed](#) Russian President Vladimir Putin’s electoral rating — the number of Russians ready to vote for his re-election — at 32%, a record low.

“Putin generally does believe in his own popularity,” said Tatiana Stanovaya, founder of R.Politik, a political consultancy firm.

“But the events in Kazakhstan could make him doubt how sustainable that popularity really is.”

For some opposition-minded Russians, recalling how the outbreak of unrest in Belarus in summer 2020 presaged an unprecedented crackdown at home, events in Kazakhstan bodes ill for Russian liberties.

“We’ll be the ones to pay for the Kazakhs’ freedom,” [wrote](#) Kirill Martynov, deputy editor of Russia’s independent Novaya Gazeta newspaper, on Twitter, predicting a crackdown by Russian security services fearing copycat protests across the border.

Grip on power

For others, the protests in Kazakhstan — which were in large part directed against Nursultan Nazarbayev, the country's founding president who resigned in 2019 but still retains extensive behind-the-scenes powers — could influence Vladimir Putin's choice on whether to stay in office or not.

After Nazarbayev — who is personally close to Putin — departed from the presidency to head his country's powerful Security Council, some observers suggested that the Russian president might eventually follow the Kazakh model, by handing over day-to-day responsibilities to a hand-picked successor while retaining ultimate control.

However, the outpouring of rage against the man who has led Kazakhstan since it was part of the Soviet Union, including scenes of a Nazarbayev statue in the city of Taldykorgan being felled by protesters, may lead Putin to conclude that loosening his grip on power is dangerous.

Tokayev's Wednesday announcement that he was taking over the country's Security Council, displacing his erstwhile patron, only underlines the risks of any handover of power.

“Kazakh events make [the] Kazakhstan power transit scenario virtually impossible for Russia,” wrote Carnegie's Baunov.

“Now Putin will hardly be inclined to leave his position to a successor.”

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