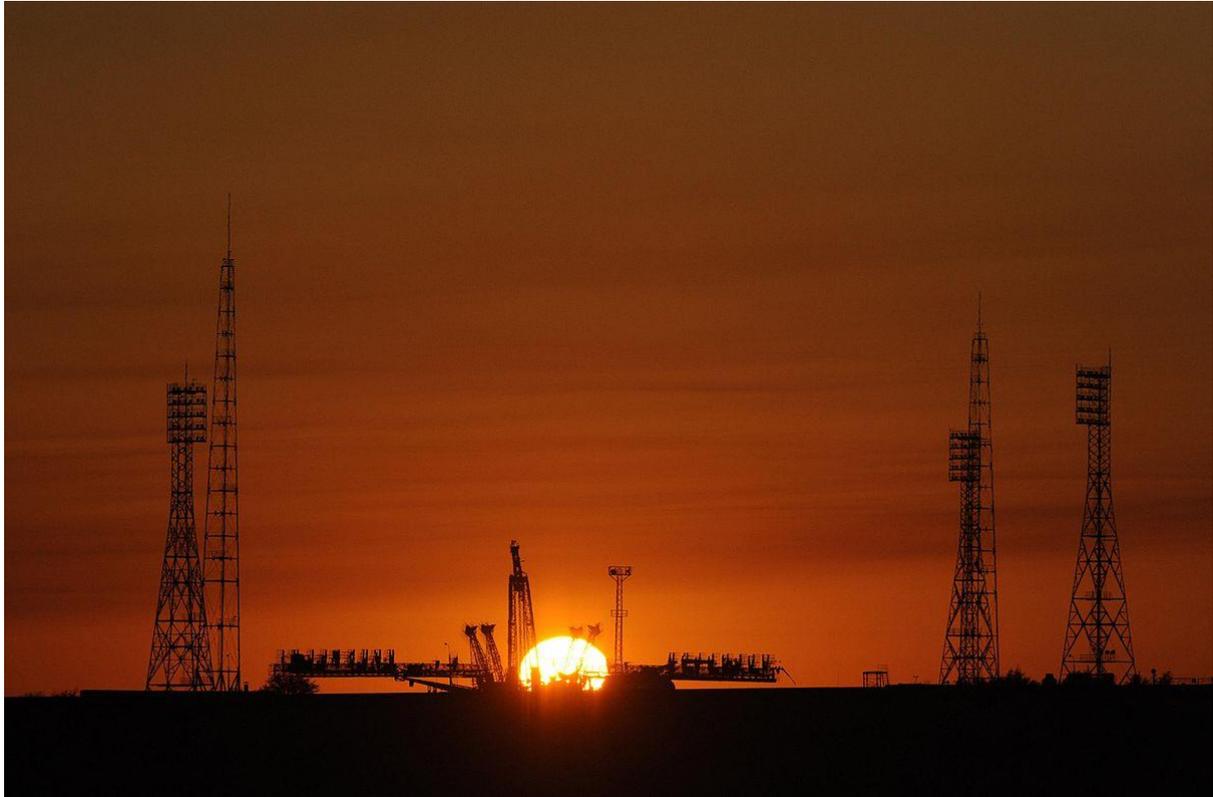


Kazakhstan steps into the sun

By Stephen Blank

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Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan

Central Asia rarely appears in Western media. So many observers have missed Kazakhstan's steady consolidation of a leading and independent regional role. Kazakhstan is deploying its convening, economic, cultural, and diplomatic power to forge a leading role in Central Asia. The country's step forward comes at Russia's expense, and Moscow has been slow to recognise that Kazakhstan is eluding its grasp.

Perhaps Kazakhstan's greatest display of independence was the decision to Latinise its alphabet, moving away from the Cyrillic script shared with Russian. This provoked a hysterical reaction from [Russian commentators](#), who saw the move as an attack on Russian culture and threat to Russian hegemony in the former Soviet Union. Although Kazakhstan cannot afford to antagonise Moscow gratuitously, this move clearly signalled Kazakh independence.

It also reflects President Nursultan Nazarbayev's conviction that Central Asia does not need external interlocutors to solve its problems. The government is also more openly expressing a version of Eurasianism – an emphasis on the centrality of

Eurasia in world politics animated by Pan-Turkism, a call for the unity of Turkic peoples. This stance dovetails with growing state-supported nationalism and promotion of Kazakh language and culture.

Kazakhstan has used its convening power to establish itself as a party that can provide mediation and hosting services for diplomatic initiatives. One example is the Astana process for the Syrian conflict. Another will be on 12 August when Astana hosts the littoral states of the Caspian Sea to ratify a treaty demarcating territorial claims allowing it to be used for commercial purposes.

Similarly, Kazakhstan hosted a summit of all the Central Asian states in March 2018, where Nazarbayev argued that Central Asia could solve its problems without outside “mentors”. Observers saw this meeting as the assertion of sovereignty by Central Asian states, indicating a new readiness to act on their own in “big politics”.

Inevitably, this generated Russian concerns. Central Asian states are still subject to their geography, so they will all need to respect Russian and Chinese interests. Nevertheless, Kazakhstan and the other Central Asian states are showing signs they will step out of their giant neighbours’ shadows.

Kazakhstan is also displaying real regional economic power. Its economy recovered from a major crisis in 2014–15 and is growing at a solid 3.5% in 2017, a low growth rate compared to 2002–13. Kazakhstan is also now exporting petroleum to other Central Asian states, apparently following China’s example by [edging](#) Russia out of Central Asian markets.

In addition, warming bilateral relations will give Kazakh banks access to Uzbekistan, opening the way to major lending and investment. Finally, Kazakhstan has laid out an economic plan to assist Afghanistan rebuild after 40 years of war.

In the security realm, Astana’s new defence doctrine also aims to strengthen domestic security against Russia’s hybrid cyber-interference and systematic propaganda warfare tactics.

All these trends are also visible in Kazakhstan’s increasingly assertive diplomacy. Astana has encouraged the opening up of Uzbekistan’s economy and government. But the most notable developments have occurred in Kazakhstan’s relations to the US. The Trump administration has outlined and started to implement a more robust Central Asian economic policy than its predecessors, emphasising economic cooperation with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

In his visit to Washington earlier this year, Nazarbayev elevated Kazakhstan’s strategic partnership with the US. Even more aggravating for Moscow, Nazarbayev flatly refused to accede to Russia’s demand to abolish the visa-free regime with

Washington. Moscow protested, saying that such a regime would allow spies to come to Kazakhstan and then enter Russian territory. In response, Nazarbayev directed Foreign Minister Kairat Abdrakhmanov to publicly respond that changing visa policy was the legitimate right of any sovereign state.

Finally, Kazakhstan granted the US access to the ports of Aktau and Kuryk for supplying Afghanistan, bypassing Russia. This decision coincided with Kazakhstan's efforts to develop Aktau through a "special economic zone".

These actions clearly raised concerns in Moscow about a strengthened US Naval presence through the Caspian ports. Russian unease about its eroding position in Central Asia is rising.

Kazakh media shot back, clearly under Nazarbayev's direction, that US use of those ports is for the transit of non-military supplies, and that Kazakhstan does not tolerate foreign military presence on its soil. As the American journal *Eurasia Insight* reported, what irks Moscow is probably not so much threats it has made about US bases or alleged bio-defence labs across the Caucasus and Central Asia; rather, it is that Central Asian states are willing to cut deals with Washington without consulting Moscow.

Kazakh readiness to exercise its independence and shake off Moscow's influence promises significant changes in regional politics and the energy market. With China investing billions in Kazakhstan, and Washington ready to follow suit, Kazakhstan has an opportunity to step into the light. More Western attention may be the catalyst for a major political development in Central Asia.

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