

Q3: FOREIGN POLICY OF KAZAKHSTAN AND ARMENIA

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I will come back to Mr. Vassilenko. I would like to ask you about your relations with your main foreign partners, your neighbors, and Kazakhstan is a real master of the multi-vector policy. You manage to maintain an extraordinary balance between Russia, China and the West. Vladimir Putin said the last time he celebrated his last birthday with President Tokayev and Uzbek President Mirziyoyev at the same time.

Presently, in Berlin, the Chancellor Scholz and President Macron, when he was in Astana, these two Western leaders praised Kazakhstan's effort to distance itself from Moscow by preventing sanctions from being circumvented.

You manage to navigate in troubled waters by avoiding obstacles and your captain is very experienced. How has the war in Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh over the past almost two years affected the relations of your country with your neighbors such as Russia, Turkey, China, and the West? Are the foreign policy priorities of your country changing? How would you like to see the role of each partner involved in the medium- and long-term and the balance between these partners?

Roman Vassilenko, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kazakhstan

Thank you. We realized ever so clearly in the past year and a half that the now famous multi-vector foreign policy that you mentioned is actually the only foreign policy that we, as a country, can pursue. We are a country of 20 million people neighboring one country of 1.5 billion people, another country of 140 million people, and a landlocked country, the largest landlocked country in the world. You can only build positive mutually respectful relations with your neighbors and with others, and that is the only way forward.

In the past year and a half, what we have seen is that the West has sort of rediscovered with greater clarity the importance of Central Asia. The relations were developing in the 30 years of our independence, but the blinkers were taken off the eyes of policymakers in Brussels, Paris, Berlin, London, Washington. This intensification of political contact and the strengthening of these diplomatic efforts on behalf of the West is very much welcome by Kazakhstan as this part of the general equation for our foreign policy.

Naturally, we continue to strengthen and develop our cooperation with Russia, with whom we share the longest continuous land border in the world (7 500 kilometers) and with China, our two largest neighbors.

Generally, I think it is important to highlight that, in our region, perhaps three dynamics are taking place. One is that the challenges are really aggravating as far as security is concerned, and I mean primarily water scarcity. That is a big challenge for Central Asia.

Climate change is another one, and we heard just now from the Emirati Minister that if even one quarter of Greenland melts, then the water in the oceans will rise by two meters. In Central Asia already, this climate change is twice as fast and is worse than globally. It is already creating droughts, problems, etc.

Then there are things such as the lack of agreement between countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan over their borders. There are also a set of challenges emanating from an unstable situation in Afghanistan, which we should also not forget about. That is one trend.

The second trend that we are seeing is the growing desire by five Central Asian countries to work together. You may have seen that we have now held five meetings of the five leaders. Moreover, the Central Asia Plus platforms has proliferated like mushrooms after the rain: now there are 11 platforms, ranging from one with the EU, to one with Germany, the United States, Russia, China, etc.

However, the third dynamic that we see is this growing engagement by the outside partners. It is not just the West, it is also Russia, China, and Turkey, that really intensified their efforts to be present in Central Asia, to develop corporations, to invest, if you will, to pull us towards themselves.

Frankly speaking, in Central Asia we do not like this kind of great game terminology, suffice to mention that a few days ago, Bloomberg published a story headlined 'Macron lands in Putin's back yard'. It created such a backlash in our society and people really are up in arms against Bloomberg now, listing all the reasons why Kazakhstan cannot be, and should not be, called 'Putin's back yard' or 'Xi Jinping's back yard', for that matter. This denies the agency for the country, denies sovereignty, but it also blinds the thinking among the policymakers.

Therefore, we are in favor of great gain for all in Central Asia. We think that there is enough room for constructive engagement by all parties. You should see how dynamically these relations are developing with the West, with Russia, with China, and with Turkey. The Turkish President and the Azeri President are in Astana today for the 10th anniversary summit of the Organization of Turkic States.

All these platforms of proliferating and Central Asia, Kazakhstan included, are very much engaged as players in this game, if you will.

Tatiana Kastouéva-Jean

Thank you very much. In my sense, Armenia moves more and more in the same way of diversification and multi-vector policy. For example, Armenia's military and security relations have always been very close to Russia. The 102nd Russia military base is located in Gyumri. There are Russian arms sales –Russia did not deliver the weapons already paid for, if I understand properly – and Armenia's borders with Iran and with Turkey are protected by the Russian Border Service.



At the same time, Armenian Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, recently made a very strong declaration. He spoke of the need to diversify security relations because Russia failed to fulfil its allied obligations during the escalation on the Armenian/Azerbaijan border.

Recently, the Armenian President said, on France, to TV channels that the country needs new military partners besides Russia. And France knows, in October, that it will supply arms to Armenia.

What about your diversification of the foreign policy: closer to the West, less close to Russia? What kind of balance are you seeking?

Vahan Kostanyan, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia

It is not about getting closer to someone in contradiction with our relations with our partners but, given the situation and given the facts, what we went through during the past years, we understood the need to diversify our relations and having security complement being in relations with our partners is also very important.

Unfortunately, in September 2022, when Armenia's sovereign territory was attacked and was occupied, Russia and other CSTO partners of ours did not even have the political will to state that the territorial integrity of Armenia was violated.

On the contrast, the European Union and EU member states came with very strong statements, but not only statements, also actions: the deployment of EU monitoring mission to Armenia/Azerbaijan interstate border. The mandate of this mission was clearly mentioned that it was deployed to Armenia/Azerbaijan interstate border, meaning that there cannot be excuses that the border is not delimited, etc., that we heard from our CSTO colleagues.

This was an example of how we were trying to recreate and rebuild a new security architecture for our country.

On the other hand, you are correct: we are diversifying the markets from where we are buying weapons, which are for defensive purpose only. France and India are one of our partners.

We are determined to cooperate in this sphere with other colleagues as well, bearing in mind that we have a right to protect our sovereignty and territorial integrity, and we do not have any intention to attack any of our neighbors.