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KAZAKHSTAN AND ASEAN: THE UNEXPLORED VECTOR IN KAZAKHSTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

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Introduction

Following Kazakhstan's independence from the Soviet Union in December 1991, it has tried to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy, seeking to maintain good relations with all the major players in the international arena, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The ASEAN vector in Kazakhstan's foreign policy, however, has so far been relatively unexplored and unexamined, despite the growing significance of ASEAN in international relations with a population of nearly 650 million, a combined GDP of US\$ 2,986 billion and a steady GDP growth of around five per cent annually.¹ ASEAN, which encompasses all ten Southeast Asian countries, has also often taken the lead in Asia-Pacific regionalism through establishments of dialogue mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and the East Asia Summit (EAS). Kazakhstan thus views ASEAN as not only a potential large market for its trade and investment, but also as one of its access points to greater political and economic integration in the dynamically growing Asia-Pacific region. Kazakhstan has, therefore, often tried to engage with ASEAN and to take part in ASEAN-led fora, especially the ARF, but to no avail.

This article firstly examines Kazakhstan's main foreign policy traits and how ASEAN fits in its multi-vector policy. It then analyses Kazakhstan's

engagement with ASEAN and how the ‘China factor’ and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) may open up opportunities for both sides to engage with each other more. It also looks at how Kazakhstan views ASEAN as a successful model for regionalism that Central Asia may follow. Lastly, it examines the prospects for development under a Tokayev presidency. The focus is on ASEAN as a regional grouping rather than on relations with particular member states.

Unpacking Kazakhstan’s foreign policy

Kazakhstan is often described as pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy. The term was first introduced into the official discourse by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1995 in the preface of a collection of speeches and articles presented at the Council on the Foreign Policy of Kazakhstan in Almaty, which stated that “Due to the peculiarities of its geographic location, Kazakhstan adheres to the principles of multivectorism, realising a course of development of balanced relations with both European and Asian nations.”² The main goal was to create a favourable international environment for the economic and political modernisation of the country. As the then President Nazarbayev stated, a multi-vector foreign policy was “the development of friendly and predictable relations with all states that play a significant role in global politics and represent practical interest for our country.”³ The policy was also initially used to solidify a Kazakhstani national identity, given the country’s unique diverse ethnic demography, as well as to search for both massive capital investment and multiple routes to the global markets for Kazakhstan’s burgeoning oil and gas industries and supplies from a multitude of foreign partners.⁴

By the close of the 2000s, Kazakhstan’s multi-vector policy had been largely successful in managing relations with Russia, Central Asia’s traditional hegemon, developing a burgeoning relationship with the region’s emerging great power – China – and developing a generally positive relationship with the global hegemon, the US. But since the global financial crisis, Kazakhstan has found itself torn between the dynamics generated by divergent integration projects espoused by these great powers, especially from China and Russia.⁵ Also, worsening tensions between the West and Russia, especially after Russia’s annexation of the Crimea in 2014, have made it increasingly difficult for Kazakhstan to balance adroitly between the great powers, thereby rendering its multi-vector policy as increasingly “reactive” with Kazakhstan adopting cautious positions whenever international disputes involving Russia

arises.⁶ Nonetheless, a multi-vector foreign policy has remained a guiding principle in Kazakhstan's foreign policy and is one of the basic principles in its Foreign Policy Concept for 2014–2020, along with associated principles such as balance, pragmatism, mutual benefit and solid defence of the national interests.⁷

Kazakhstan's foreign policy was also guided by President Nazarbayev's espousal of Eurasianism, whereby Kazakhstan's location in both Asia and Europe enables it to play the role of a bridge between the two continents. He claimed that Kazakhstan's uniqueness, which stems from being Eurasian, is symbolised by the snow leopard, an animal unique to the mountains of Kazakhstan, which is fiercely independent but never the first to attack anyone, and is a combination of "western elegance" and "oriental wisdom", embodying a space linking Europe to the Asia-Pacific.⁸ More concretely, President Nazarbayev proposed in 1994 the creation of a Eurasian Union, essentially a regional economic space linking up the dynamic economic developments in the EU, East Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia.

Kazakhstan's Eurasianism policy has served several purposes: internationally, it has helped Kazakhstan to develop and maintain balanced and friendly relations with all major states and blocs, which essentially is Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy; regionally, it is used as a vehicle and policy guideline for creating and deepening the integration process in the post-Soviet space; and domestically, it is used for consolidating national integration, nation-building and creating national consensus and harmony among the different ethnicities and faiths in Kazakhstan.⁹ This diverse ethnic makeup has meant that Kazakhstan had formulated and implemented its foreign policy in a way that expresses the interests of the state as a whole rather than of any particular ethnic group, including the Kazakhs, and that Nazarbayev has been acutely aware of his ethnic constituencies in his foreign policy formation. This "weak Kazakhstani identity," while conducive to a flexible multi-vector foreign policy, also prevents a strong foreign policy direction, thereby creating the overall impression that "the country is floating between, rather than anchoring, East and West."¹⁰

Kazakhstan is also the largest non-coastal country in the world and the paradox of its situation is that it is both landlocked and transcontinental, straddling Asia and Europe. This has implications for its foreign policy. Being landlocked means it has to pursue a multi-vectored foreign policy to diversify its relations and lessen its dependence on neighbouring states through which Kazakhstan's access to the sea and upon which trade with

extra-regional countries is dependent. As a transcontinental state, on the other hand, Kazakhstan has opportunities to use its transit potential, as a bridge between Europe and Asia. Economically, Kazakhstan is able to counterbalance the negative economic implications of its non-coastal location by leveraging all available transit resources that it has at its disposal. In terms of international politics, being transcontinental means that Kazakhstan can join various regional political and economic organisations as well as initiate its own in the Eurasian space.¹¹ Kazakhstan's landlocked and transcontinental position has also encouraged it to implement a multi-vector foreign policy in its strategy of railway connectivity against the backdrop of multiple intercontinental transport corridor projects. It has sought to reach out to multiple countries as sources of assistance in order to prevent any single country becoming the dominant partner. Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy has enabled it to benefit from its monopoly in being the shortest route between Europe and Asia, while expanding its potential economic rents and simultaneously reinforcing its sovereignty.¹² Similarly, intentional diversification in Kazakhstan's international partners can be seen in its search for diverse foreign investors in its energy sector.¹³

ASEAN in Kazakhstan's 'Asian vector'

The Asian vector has traditionally been one of the priorities in Kazakhstan's foreign policy due to its geographical position as well as the growing importance of Asia in the global economy and politics.¹⁴ The importance of Asia in Kazakhstan's foreign policy was particularly underlined by the increasing economic dynamism of the region and, more recently, by China's BRI. As President Nazarbayev stated at the April 2019 Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, "The historic cycle again brings the centre of the world's gravitation to the East ... We see today that Asia has become a region of the 21st century, ... Already, this trend of civilization is offering new horizons for cooperation."¹⁵ Asia was also attractive for Kazakhstan as the region where several countries have managed to achieve significant economic development whilst retaining the authoritarian nature of their political system, which accorded well with Kazakhstan's own authoritarian regime and political culture.¹⁶ According to its Foreign Policy Concept for 2014–2020, the 'Asian vector' was focused on "enhancing cooperation in trade, investment, economic and technology with the countries of East, South, Southeast Asia, the Asia-Pacific region and their regional associations."¹⁷ Despite not being named in the Concept itself, ASEAN was long acknowledged

as one foreign policy ‘vector’ for Kazakhstan due to being an important player in the Asia-Pacific region as it was in the ‘driver’s seat’ of regionalism. Kazakh diplomats recognised that ASEAN played a crucial role in the formation of regional institutions. As then Kazakh Foreign Minister Erlan Idrissov noted in a meeting with ASEAN ambassadors in 2014, ASEAN had become “a centre of Asian integration” and “a basic structure for multilateral regional cooperation and it plays an important role in cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.”¹⁸ Kazakhstan, therefore, sought to enhance cooperation with ASEAN and its member countries, while for ASEAN, Kazakhstan was seen as the most viable strategic partner among the countries of Central Asia.¹⁹ Enhanced integration among the ASEAN member states through the building of an ASEAN Community and thereby becoming one ‘pole’ in a multipolar world also accorded well with Kazakhstan’s firm conviction that “multi-polarity is the fairest and most rational form of world order that alone can ensure a balance of forces and a secure world.”²⁰

Kazakhstan also consistently attempted to establish cooperation between ASEAN and organisations or initiatives that it was a member of or played a leading role. Nazarbayev was keen on strengthening cooperation between the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), in which Kazakhstan is a member, with ASEAN, and in April 2005, the secretariats of the two organisations signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to undertake cooperation in various security and socio-economic fields.²¹ The Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), which was Nazarbayev’s initiative, was another organisation that Nazarbayev had been eager to establish cooperation with ASEAN. Kazakhstan had long been pushing for a MoU between CICA and ASEAN but with no success. Another Nazarbayev proposal was the formation of a Eurasian Security Zone based on the transformation of CICA into a full-fledged ‘Organization for Security and Cooperation in Asia’. The first step towards this would be the convening of a Joint Consultative Meeting between the secretariats or chairs of CICA, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and ASEAN.²² Kazakhstan’s foreign ministry proposed such a meeting to be held in April 2019 during the Slovak foreign minister’s visit to Kazakhstan (the Slovak Republic was the OSCE Chair), but while the OSCE was generally receptive, ASEAN was less than enthusiastic in its response. The idea was seemingly dropped after Nazarbayev’s resignation in March 2019 and subsequent references to the idea only referred to cooperation between CICA and the OSCE.²³ The author’s conversations with Kazakhstani diplomats also confirmed that due to ASEAN’s muted

response, ASEAN was no longer referred to in the initiative for now. Another area of cooperation and exchanges of experiences that has often been discussed was between ASEAN's Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ) and the Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone Treaty (CANWFZ), of which Kazakhstan is an active member. In August 2019, Kazakhstan hosted a seminar on the Development and Strengthening of Consultation Mechanisms between Existing Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones, which brought together representatives of all nuclear-weapon-free zones, including SEANWFZ, for consultations.²⁴

Kazakhstan's engagement with ASEAN

Kazakhstan had often expressed its intention to strengthen relations with ASEAN, especially to become a member of the ARF since 1995, which was periodically followed up in 2003, 2005 and 2007.²⁵ In a July 2005 meeting between Mukhtar Tleuberdi, the then Ambassador of Kazakhstan to Indonesia (and now Kazakhstani foreign minister), with Ong Keng Yong, the then ASEAN Secretary-General, Kazakhstan's intention to engage in the ARF was welcomed by the Secretary-General, who expressed his support and noted that ASEAN member countries also considered Kazakhstan as a possible strategic partner in Central Asia. Thailand, Viet Nam, and the Philippines were highlighted as ASEAN member countries that had expressed their readiness to support Kazakhstan to become a member of the ARF, while non-ASEAN members like Russia and Japan had also expressed their support.²⁶ Nonetheless, no significant progress was made perhaps due to the fact that the level of Kazakhstan's engagement with ASEAN and its demonstrative impact on Asia-Pacific security was not seen by some countries as sufficient to warrant membership. The ARF also had a moratorium in place since 1996 due to concern about the Forum expanding too rapidly to the detriment of its consolidation. However, this was not strictly complied with as Mongolia (1998), North Korea (2000), Pakistan (2003), East Timor (2005), Bangladesh (2006), Sri Lanka (2007) all later became members.²⁷ This constant lifting of the *de facto* moratorium when it suited some members' interests demonstrated that Kazakhstan's future membership would not be impossible. As the then Thai Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya stated in response to the then Kazakh Foreign Minister Kanat Saudabayev's request for Thailand's support, as ASEAN Chair, for Kazakhstan's ARF membership, "although there was currently a moratorium on new ARF membership, Thailand was open to Kazakhstan's

possible future membership.”²⁸ Nonetheless, since the admission of Sri Lanka in 2007, the ARF has yet to set a precedent on how to address outstanding applications and the issue of the lifting of the moratorium has not been discussed again in the ARF, while the issue of Kazakhstan’s application to the ARF was never discussed in detail in the ARF as well.²⁹ Furthermore, some Kazakhstani experts themselves felt it was necessary for Kazakhstan, before joining the ARF, to develop a comprehensive and sufficiently structured vision of participation, along with the aims and expected results, and a plan of action in the framework of the ARF. Also, it should be carried out step by step, perhaps beginning with a status of dialogue partner in order to participate in the intersessional working groups and meetings of the ARF, and to enlist the support of the majority of member states.³⁰

Kazakhstan had also applied for ASEAN dialogue partner status, but a moratorium on dialogue partner applications had been imposed since 1999. The initial rationale for dialogue partnerships was also to seek external aid and cooperation for ASEAN’s economic growth and development. With this in mind, the negligible volume of trade between Kazakhstan and ASEAN countries remained an obstacle to Kazakhstan achieving such status. According to ASEAN Secretariat figures, trade turnover between ASEAN and Kazakhstan in 2017 was US\$ 579 million which amounts to a mere 0.03 per cent of ASEAN’s total trade with the rest of the world in the same year (US\$ 1.98 trillion).³¹ While Kazakhstan’s trade statistics are higher at US\$ 975.2 million in the same year, this still only represents 1.25 per cent of Kazakhstan’s total trade with the whole world.³² So both ASEAN’s and Kazakhstan’s share in each other’s total trade is very low. One main reason for this low trade and economic interaction is the geographical distance and weak transport and logistical links between them. Kazakhstan did not let up and tried to step up its overall engagement with ASEAN and in January 2014 appointed its Ambassador to Indonesia as its first Ambassador to ASEAN. However, according to the ASEAN Secretariat, “apart from accrediting its Ambassador to ASEAN, there has been no substantive cooperation between ASEAN and Kazakhstan”, and Kazakhstan is yet “neither a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN nor observer.”³³ Due to the restrictions on Kazakhstan becoming an ASEAN dialogue partner, or any other partnership status, in the near future, some Kazakhstani experts proposed another way to enhance ASEAN-Kazakhstan relations by establishing a C5 + 1 dialogue with ASEAN, such as that held between the five Central Asian countries with Japan, the US, South Korea and, more recently, India, as an idea worth exploring.³⁴

The ‘China factor’ and its Belt and Road Initiative

The imposition of Western sanctions on Russia following its annexation of Crimea in 2014 severely affected Russia as the dominant economy of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), thereby indirectly affecting its other members, including Kazakhstan, who were forced to look East for further economic opportunities, particularly towards China. However, growing Chinese economic influence in the Eurasian economic space, especially through its BRI, has caused some concerns regarding China, notably in Kazakhstan which shares a long border of 1,783 km with China and forms the centrepiece or ‘buckle’ of the BRI. Perceptions of China in Kazakhstan generally differ between the elite, which holds favourable views due to the economic benefits from Chinese investment and business, and the general public, which is fearful that Chinese migrants would flood in and take away local jobs and land, and that China would demand readjustments to existing borders. Reports of China’s repression and detention of its Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, mainly Uighurs but also Kazakhs, worsens China’s image in the eyes of Kazakhs and other Central Asian peoples. The perceived lack of transparency in some of its business dealings further damages China’s image.³⁵ Indeed, according to one Kazakhstani expert on China, this growing fear of Chinese influence had prompted some of the EAEU countries to look increasingly towards the countries of ASEAN in order to help balance Beijing’s growing economic influence in Central Eurasia. He further suggested that cooperation between Central Asian states and ASEAN to develop a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) could be “one alternative to Chinese domination in Central Asia.”³⁶ As another Kazakhstani expert noted, ASEAN has a more positive image in Central Asia than China, which gives impetus for greater cooperation between ASEAN and Central Asia.³⁷

ASEAN itself is studying the potential for an ASEAN-EAEU free trade agreement. Due to the Western sanctions on Russia, which has affected the whole of EAEU, there is pent-up demand for produce, especially in Russia, and ASEAN is seen as the logical alternative supplier.³⁸ Indeed, an MoU on economic cooperation was signed between the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC), which is the EAEU’s executive and regulatory body, and the ASEAN Secretariat in November 2018. Some ASEAN member countries have already concluded a FTA with the EAEU or expressed interest to do so. After Viet Nam signed a FTA with the EAEU in May 2015, economic relations have skyrocketed.

Kazakhstan, more than anyone else in the EAEU, benefited from this agreement. In 2017, trade between the two countries increased by 48 per cent amounting to US\$ 542 million. Kazakhstan's exports to Viet Nam grew by 63 per cent due to the increase in supplies of food, agricultural products and metals.³⁹ In October 2019, Singapore also signed a FTA with the EAEU, making it the second ASEAN country after Viet Nam to do so.⁴⁰ As a first step towards possible conclusion of a FTA, Indonesia, Cambodia and Thailand have all signed a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) with the EEC, with the hope of boosting trade with EAEU members, including Kazakhstan. Thailand is particularly interested in concluding a FTA with the EAEU. It well recognises the disadvantage from lagging behind Viet Nam, and more recently Singapore, as it means that at present Thai goods in Kazakhstan are much more expensive than Viet Nam's, thereby making Thai exports much less competitive. As the Ambassador of Thailand to Kazakhstan noted, "... the slower we are in negotiating, the more losses we will incur."⁴¹ The interest of ASEAN countries to strengthen economic relations with the EAEU bodes well for the potential enhancement of trade between Kazakhstan and ASEAN as the case with Viet Nam. It also opens up the possibility of ASEAN countries becoming a counterweight to Chinese economic influence in Kazakhstan in the future.

Furthermore, in recent years, there has been growing interest in developing economic and transport linkages between ASEAN and Central Asia. China's BRI, which encompasses China's 'Silk Road Economic Belt' announced by President Xi Jinping in Astana in 2013, together with China's '21st Century Maritime Silk Road' announced in Jakarta the same year, has meant that ASEAN countries have begun to explore ways to connect Southeast Asia to Central Asia in a single economic corridor.⁴² Kazakhstan, as the largest country in Central Asia and being centrally located, plays a pivotal role in China's BRI connecting Europe and Asia, and has therefore attracted the greater attention of ASEAN countries. The implementation of Kazakhstan's own 'Nurly Zhol' (Bright Path) infrastructure programme, which was launched in 2014 and is closely linked to China's BRI, positions the country as a transit and trade bridge between Europe and Asia. As then Kazakhstani Deputy Foreign Minister Askar Mussinov declared to ASEAN ambassadors, the Nurly Zhol programme was an opportunity to develop closer comprehensive economic relations with the ASEAN countries.⁴³ China's BRI, therefore, well corresponds with Kazakhstan's self-perception of being a linchpin of the modern Silk Road and also fits well with Kazakhstan's Nurly Zhol programme to develop its domestic transport

infrastructure and effectively integrate it into international transport systems.⁴⁴

Indeed, Kazakhstan, as a key country on China's 'new Silk Road', was specially invited to participate in the China-ASEAN Exposition for the first time in September 2017 in Nanning, China, where it showcased its products with the hope of deepening Kazakh economic relations with ASEAN countries.⁴⁵ Kazakhstan's interest in connecting with Southeast Asian countries through China is not new. Since the early 1990s, Kazakhstan had tried to reduce its dependency on Russian transportation routes for its goods to the Pacific and Southeast Asia, including its oil, and it viewed transport through China as one of the most important and profitable alternatives. In September 1995, during President Nazarbayev's visit to China, an agreement was signed that allowed Kazakhstan's trade exchanges with Pacific and Southeast Asian countries to be conducted via the Chinese port of Lianyungang, which would save approximately 5,000 km in transport as the distance between Kazakhstan and Lianyungang port is around 3,500 km while that between Kazakhstan and the nearest Russian Far Eastern port is about 8,500 km.⁴⁶ Kazakhstan's attempt to transform itself into a regional transit hub offers significant opportunities for Central Asia to be linked with major trade hubs in Eurasia and the opening up of new trade routes, including to Southeast Asia. Kazakhstan's attraction lays in the fact that it has a more developed economy and infrastructure than any other Central Asian country, such as the Khorgos transport and logistics hub on the border with China, the Western China-Western Europe international highway, the Aktau seaport, as well as the Kazakh logistics terminal in Lianyungang port in China. By utilising these advantages, Kazakhstan would be able to provide links between the other Central Asian states with ASEAN countries. The transportation of goods between Europe and ASEAN via the Khorgos-Lianyungang land route and then by sea from Lianyungang port to the ASEAN countries is at least twice as fast as via the Indian Ocean and therefore saves both time and money. It is a particular advantage for the transport of foodstuffs and other perishable goods.⁴⁷

ASEAN countries like Viet Nam have already started to use the route through China and Kazakhstan. Two transport routes have been opened up – the Vietnamese railway terminal of Dong Dang at the border with China, and the Kazakhstan logistics terminal in Lianyungang port in China. In March 2019, Vietnamese goods were for the first time transported by train via the Viet Nam – China – Kazakhstan – Europe route, starting from Hanoi and ending in Duisberg, Germany, taking 22

days, including two days for the transportation of goods from Viet Nam to China at the Vietnamese border railway terminal of Dong Dang. This project started in 2016 and is part of Kazakhstan's efforts to integrate into a global transport system and explore its transport potential, in particular through its Nurly Zhol programme and China's BRI. In addition to this route, goods between Viet Nam and Kazakhstan are also transported via the Kazakhstan terminal in Lianyungang port, through which Kazakh wheat is transported to Viet Nam. Viet Nam's population of over 94 million people is seen as a promising market for Kazakhstan's agricultural products, while Vietnamese producers could supply seafood and fresh tropical fruits to Kazakhstan. It is expected that both routes would boost trade between Kazakhstan and Viet Nam even more.⁴⁸

Seeing Viet Nam's success in utilising this Lianyungang-Khorgos route for enhancing its trade with Kazakhstan, the Thai Embassy in Kazakhstan launched a project in August 2019 to explore the possibility of Thai exporters using the same route in order to overcome the logistics and transport obstacles Thai exporters are currently facing. Nonetheless, Thai exporters and Kazakhstani importers who have tried to use the Khorgos route have often experienced problems with Chinese paperwork irregularities that have caused delays in their shipments to Kazakhstan, affecting Thai exports which are often perishable goods like fruit and vegetables.⁴⁹

Kazakhstan's central position in China's BRI is thus seen as a selling point to attract greater ASEAN attention and to overcome current obstacles to trade. As the then Kazakhstani Ambassador to Singapore noted, while acknowledging that Singapore-Kazakhstan trade remains low due to Kazakhstan being a small market for Singapore and Singapore's knowledge of Kazakhstan being very limited, the BRI presents a great opportunity for Kazakhstan to attract investments not only from Singapore, but also from other Southeast Asian countries. Indeed, Singapore's position as a key maritime hub and economic leader in ASEAN makes it interested in the BRI as an additional corridor to expand export networks and access new markets.⁵⁰

ASEAN as a model for Central Asian regionalism?

Since 1993 when the five leaders of the Central Asian states agreed to redefine the region as 'Central Asia' instead of the Soviet term 'Middle Asia' (*Srednaia Aziia*), Central Asian regionalism has developed in fits

and starts. The 1990s saw the emergence of the Central Asian Union in 1994, which later became the Central Asian Economic Union (CAEU) in 1998, which then was transformed into the Central Asian Cooperation Organisation (CACO) in 2001 with all Central Asian states as members except for Turkmenistan, citing its non-aligned status. Russia joined in 2004 and proceeded to displace the organisation with Moscow's own Eurasian integration project, the Eurasian Economic Community, culminating in the EAEU in 2015. Although the Central Asian republics have many things in common, namely a shared history and ties with the Russian empire and later the Soviet Union, similar problems of independent state-building, and a perceived common threat from Russia, China and extremist religious groups, Central Asian regionalism has never successfully got off the ground. This is due to the focus on national consolidation, the turbulent regional environment, and the prominent role of external powers and geopolitical competition. Intraregional suspicion and rivalry, especially that between the two potential regional leaders – Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, has further weakened efforts at regionalism.⁵¹

However, recent movement towards the re-emergence of Central Asian regionalism was ignited by the drop in oil prices in late 2014, which led to serious political and economic reforms being undertaken by the two leading Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Moreover, the greater openness of Uzbekistan under its new President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who, upon assuming the presidency after the death of President Karimov in 2016, pursued a foreign policy of greater engagement and dialogue with its neighbours, seeking to resolve previously contentious issues as border delimitation and use of water resources, helped remove impediments to regionalism.⁵² In March 2018, a Central Asian Summit was held for the first time in Astana (now Nur-Sultan) at the invitation of then President Nazarbayev but at the initiative of President Mirziyoyev. A second summit was held on 29 November 2019 in Tashkent. Such movement towards Central Asian regionalism has prompted increasing discussion amongst analysts both within and outside the region about the possibility of Central Asia following other successful models of regional cooperation such as the Nordic Council, Mercosur and ASEAN, while continent-wide supranational structures like the EU hold less appeal for Central Asian leaders.⁵³ Some have highlighted ASEAN as a suitable model for Central Asian regionalism. Central Asia is far more homogenous than Southeast Asia, and its leaders also subscribe to the ASEAN principles of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states and the peaceful resolution of disputes. Central

Asia can benefit from ASEAN's experience in the development of a core of solidarity among its members to prevent foreign powers from playing ASEAN members against each other, which served ASEAN well during the Cold War and continues to be of value in the face of a rising China. Moreover, for Central Asian regionalism to be successful and inclusive of all the five Central Asian states, there must be a positive and constructive relationship between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, while the voices and concerns of the three other states must also be taken fully on board. Turkmenistan's historical aloofness from regional initiatives due to its non-aligned status is another factor that must be managed.⁵⁴ ASEAN's gradual, flexible and consensual development process can, therefore, prove to be a useful model for Central Asian cooperation in this regard.

Within Kazakhstan, this idea had also gained traction among diplomats and experts who have considered ASEAN as a viable model for Central Asian integration. As the then Foreign Minister Idrissov stated, Kazakhstan was interested in the ASEAN experience and its mechanisms to strengthen and develop regional cooperation in Central Asia.⁵⁵ One Kazakhstani researcher also claimed that "Kazakhstan is interested in using the ASEAN experience and mechanism of work in the process of strengthening and developing regional cooperation in Central Asia."⁵⁶ Kazakhstani analysts also see the tasks facing ASEAN at its beginning similar to those facing Central Asian states today namely, economic depression, unresolved inter-ethnic and territorial problems, and great-power rivalry in the region. In their view, ASEAN's success in uniting small states to withstand pressure from larger states is also attractive for Central Asian states who are currently facing an even more precarious balance of power.⁵⁷ As one Kazakhstani analyst noted, "Central Asian states could possibly create their own regional platform similar to ASEAN to resist the expansion of China, Russia or America."⁵⁸ Indeed, the trend towards a new Central Asian regionalism where the region's countries should jointly work together independent from outside influence is well reflected in President Nazarbayev's remarks after meeting President Mirziyoyev in 2018 that Central Asians are capable of managing the challenges in the region by themselves without interference from outsiders. The ASEAN experience of developing dialogues as a unit with other powers is therefore useful for Central Asia in demonstrating that regional states with a primary loyalty to each other first can then jointly develop fruitful relations with outside powers.⁵⁹

President Tokayev and ASEAN

As Tokayev himself stated in his inaugural speech as interim President, he will continue the “strategic course” of his predecessor, President Nazarbayev.⁶⁰ After his election to the office of President on 9 June 2019, Tokayev reiterated at his inauguration address three days later that there would be no change in his foreign policy.⁶¹ This would include the multi-vector foreign policy which Tokayev himself had helped to develop and which he implemented when he was at the helm of the foreign ministry.⁶² Tokayev wrote that fate itself determined that Kazakhstan should pursue a multi-vector foreign policy due to the country’s central position in Eurasia, and that “it would be unnatural and even harmful to avoid cooperation with the countries of South and Southeast Asia ...”⁶³ Tokayev also has direct experience working in Southeast Asia. He started his training at the Soviet Foreign Ministry in the Southeast Asia department, and his first work abroad was at the consular section in the Soviet Embassy in Singapore and later in the political section (1975–1979). Tokayev recalled that due to his ‘Asian’ appearance and knowledge of Chinese, he would be singled out from the rest of the Soviet diplomatic corps and was remembered by the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.⁶⁴ As one former Singaporean diplomat pointed out, as a former foreign minister, Tokayev is familiar with ASEAN and is likely to maintain good relations with it. Moreover, Singapore is likely to retain its good reputation in a Tokayev presidency as Tokayev, like Nazarbayev before him, is also a long-time admirer of Lee Kuan Yew and of Singapore.⁶⁵ As Tokayev remarked to Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at a meeting during the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council in Armenia in October 2019, Singapore “is highly respected in Kazakhstan” and that the close relationship between Lee Kuan Yew and Nazarbayev formed the background for very close relations between the two countries.⁶⁶

It is also probable that Tokayev will pursue a more Asian-focused foreign policy due to Tokayev’s own expertise and interest in Asia. ASEAN is likely to be more visible on Kazakhstan’s radar screen, and ASEAN countries should hasten to take this opportunity to strengthen closer relations with Kazakhstan. However, due to Kazakhstan’s limited resources it will have to assign priority to relations with particular ASEAN countries that would benefit Kazakhstan, such as Singapore, as a model of a successful advanced economy, and Thailand as a leader in the tourism and service-based industry, an area which Kazakhstan is trying to promote.⁶⁷ The recent restructuring of the Foreign

Ministry in October 2019 by creating a separate Department for the Asia-Pacific from the previous Department of Asian and African countries seems to reflect this more Asian focus. As the Director of the new department explained the rationale to Thailand's Ambassador, "the 21st century is the century of Asia."⁶⁸ Tokayev will continue the positioning of Kazakhstan as the 'buckle' in China's BRI. It will continue its major investments in roads, railways and ports to establish transport corridors to the east, west and south. Tokayev will also continue to integrate Afghanistan as part of Central Asia since it plays a particularly important role in Kazakhstan's 'connectivity' strategy, as it is the key to transport to the Indian sub-continent and Southeast Asia, opening up those major markets for Kazakhstan and Central Asia.⁶⁹

Tokayev also sees great potential in linking up the EAEU economic space with ASEAN. As he stated at the aforementioned Supreme Eurasian Economic Council meeting, "A promising trend is seen in building ties between the EAEU and major international organisations, such as ASEAN ... Singapore, along with Vietnam, is the second country with which the EAEU will have a respective [free trade] agreement." Moreover, he noted that the recently-launched transcontinental Vietnam-China-Kazakhstan-Europe railway route offers exporters access to ASEAN markets and that this could provide an alternative to sea transportation, allowing goods from Southeast Asia to be delivered to Europe through EAEU member states, such as Kazakhstan, in the shortest time.⁷⁰

To conclude, despite Kazakhstan's unsuccessful attempts thus far to participate in ASEAN-led fora and to achieve any dialogue partner status with ASEAN, Kazakhstan's central role in China's BRI, through its railway link between Lianyungang port and the Khorgos dry port, has proven attractive enough to warrant the increased attention of ASEAN countries which look to find faster ways to transport goods to Europe as well as access to the opening Central Asian market. Kazakhstan has also 'marketed' this central role in its engagement with ASEAN, hoping to use it as an access point to greater cooperation with ASEAN member countries. ASEAN is also seen by Kazakhstan as a probable model for potential Central Asian regionalism. All this points to the likelihood of greater Kazakhstan-ASEAN engagement in the years ahead and that a dialogue mechanism should be established as a framework for such engagement. A C5 + ASEAN10 dialogue, similar to those between the five Central Asian states with Japan, the US, South Korea and India, perhaps at the senior officials' level to begin with, is an idea worth exploring in the ASEAN capitals and Nur-Sultan.

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