

HIGHLIGHTS

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Political Developments

Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan signed a historic border agreement and over 20 other agreements, including deals for an auto-assembly plant and a textile factory in Kyrgyzstan. The bilateral relationship between the two countries has improved since the death of Uzbekistan's leader Islam Karimov in 2016. The border agreement could lead to deeper cooperation between the two countries in a region where Russia's influence is declining. Requirements for crossing what Mirziyoev hailed as "a border of friendship" have also been relaxed -- citizens of the two countries will only need ID cards, rather than international passports.

Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin at a meeting of the Intergovernmental Council of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in Kazakhstan said that strengthening relations between Russia and Kazakhstan is an absolute priority for Moscow. Mishustin met his Kazakh counterpart, Alikhan Smailov, and said that cooperation between the two states, once part of the former Soviet Union, is based on the principles of fraternal friendship and strategic partnership. He stressed that mutual trade between the two countries is developing successfully, having grown by 10 percent last year, reaching USD25.5 billion. He noted that it is important for the countries to speed up the creation of new production chains in industry, engineering, energy and transport infrastructure. Mishustin said that the past year has clearly demonstrated that "we cannot rely on Western companies as suppliers of hardware, software and technology. In the modern world, the lack of own solutions means colonial dependence – on those countries that have them and promote them on a global scale." Almaty hosted the regular session of the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council, coinciding with the annual

Digital Almaty Forum. Attending the sessions were the heads of governments of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia.

Kazakhstan announced the closing of its trade mission in Moscow during the visit of PM Mishustin to Kazakhstan. The proposal may have gone unnoticed, if not for Russian journalists in Almaty questioning their government's representatives about Moscow's reaction to the act. The Russian response was that it was Kazakhstan's prerogative how to organize its administration when dealing with Russia. Kazakhstan said that the decision to close the trade mission was made "to optimize work of state bodies and taking into account the high level of interaction with Russia".

Kazakh rights activists sent Ukraine fresh bundles of aid including clothing, medicines - and three huge round multi-coloured yurts - a not-so coded message of support from the citizens of a country traditionally close to Moscow. The folkloric nomad tents sent to give Ukrainians a place to keep warm are part of a steady stream of donations from Kazakh civic groups that has angered Moscow and tested the Kazakh government's so far guarded stance on Russia's invasion.

But with Russia's longest land border and a large, if declining, ethnic Russian population, Kazakhstan is also warier than other neighbours about President Vladimir Putin's stated policy of using force to protect Russian-speakers abroad. Most Kazakhs say they don't want to take sides in the Ukraine war, reflecting their government's position. A poll carried out late last year showed 22% of Kazakhs supported Ukraine, against 13% for Russia, while 59% remained neutral. But some see the Ukrainian cause as similar to their own. What happened to Ukraine "could happen to us at any moment" said one Kazakh woman.

Kazakhstan's political reform programme is nearing completion with the election of a more powerful lower house of parliament, the Mazhilis, on 19th March, 2023. Voters will have at least seven political parties to choose from in their third trip to the polls in less than a year, following a referendum on constitutional reforms and a presidential election. New local bodies will also be elected on March 19.

Kazakhstan has rejected summons from a Russian Court on a Kazakh journalist over an Article written by him on the Ukraine conflict. The Kazakh foreign office said that Russian legal motions against Kazakh citizens have no legal force in Kazakhstan. Arbat.media had received a letter from the Russian court ordering its editors to show up at a trial in the city of Vladimir on February 17. At issue was the website's article "Russia Occupiers Do Not Admit Defeat In Kharkiv," which was published in September, 2022. The letter said that a lawsuit against the Kazakh website was filed by Russian armed forces. Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry said in an official letter to Arbat.media that there are no bilateral agreements between

Kazakhstan and Russia on mutual interference in media activities, adding that the media outlet did not violate any Kazakh laws.

Kazakhstan in Central Asia is emerging as a new pole of global cooperation by advocating dialogue, trade, multilateralism, and exchange of ideas among stakeholders of world peace. It now plans to play the "role of a bridge", addressing food and energy security concerns of the world. The country recently launched the 'Astana International Forum', which will act as a platform to pitch for multilateralism at a global level. One of the most significant objectives of the forum is to provide new means to amplify voices that are often marginalized. Kazakh President said: "The Astana International Forum is unique because it offers a platform for global middle powers to discuss their views and positions on the issues of today, and to put forward their own solutions to these issues."

Vast swathes of land were confiscated from Bolat Nazarbayev , Nazarbayev's brother ahead of the parliament vote in March, 2023. De-Nazarbayevification is a useful electoral strategy, which may explain why the news was announced by Kazakhstan's ruling party ahead of polls on 19th March, 2023. Nevertheless, despite losing asset after asset, authorities have not yet launched any attempt to arrest the businessman, who is said to be both ill and living abroad. The ruling Amanat party released a statement on the confiscation of land belonging to the younger Nazarbayev, a former plumber who became fantastically wealthy during his sibling's three-decade rule. Amanat seems likely to pick up a majority in the newly downsized 90-seat legislature at elections on March 19, notwithstanding the fact that a third of those seats will go to independents. So-called de-Nazarbayevification – broadly, the process of squeezing the former first family out of private wealth and public life – is a useful electoral strategy these days. To date, Nazarbayev's nephew Kairat Satybaldy is the only close blood relative of the former head of state to be convicted of a crime, receiving a six-and-a-half-year jail sentence for embezzlement, in September.

Recent weeks saw large parts of Afghanistan plunge into darkness as, faced by its coldest winter weather in 50 years and suffering energy shortages and disruptions, Uzbekistan opted to put its own citizens first and stop the electricity supplies to Afghanistan. With its power supply gone, crippling outages led to the deaths of at least 160 people left without heating, including babies, as well as the hospitalization of hundreds of others. Tashkent decided to declare force majeure to look after its own citizens first. The Taliban militants were notorious for attacking vital infrastructure during their two-decade-long insurgency, preventing the completion of big power generation projects in the country. The blackout situation was particularly galling for Kabul as it was only very recently that the Taliban proclaimed a new electricity supply agreement signed with Uzbekistan. It needs to be recognized that since the US pulled out of Afghanistan in August 2021, it is Uzbekistan, of all Afghanistan's neighbours, that has appealed to the world to recognize that working with the Taliban is the only existing option for stabilizing the country and giving its imperiled people some kind of workable future.

Landlocked Afghanistan imports more than 70% of the electricity it needs from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Iran (in fact 73% of Afghan power supply is imported—22% from Iran, 4% from Tajikistan, 17% from Turkmenistan, and 57% from Uzbekistan). The supply of surplus hydroelectric power from these countries is unreliable. The outlook for Afghanistan's future power supplies with such a high dependence on imports is precarious.

Economic Developments

The 1st Central Asian Inter-Parliamentary Forum took place in Turkistan in Kazakhstan. Parliaments of the five Central Asian nations are focussing on ways to expand inter-parliamentary relations and develop the common spiritual and cultural space. Members of parliaments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan held bilateral meetings, and debated pressing issues, including trans-border water resources of great concern to the southern regions with a population of some 3 million people.

Kazakhstan has become one of European Union's most important strategic partners as the EU looks for reliable sources of energy and natural resources, as well as secure trade routes between Europe and Asia. Kazakh Deputy Prime Minister & Foreign Minister and the European Union (EU) High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy – Vice President of the European Commission issued a joint statement, to mark the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations. The statement, highlighted the EU's full support for Kazakhstan's major political and economic reforms to create a new just and fair republic. The EU also stated its full support for Kazakhstan's large-scale political and economic reforms to advance its vision of a just and fair country, as well as its commitment to a full and transparent investigation of the events of January 2022. In the light of "the current geopolitical context", the leaders reiterated their firm commitment to the UN Charter, international law and the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. In 2023, Kazakhstan will host the EU – Central Asia Economic Forum in Almaty, the next important step in the bilateral partnership.

According to the Kazakh government, in recent years Kazakhstan has made significant progress in e-government. In the United Nations e-government ranking, the country improved its position significantly, rising from 39th to 28th place since 2018, and in the sub-ranking of online services, it entered the top 10 list of countries, rising from 16th to 8th place. Kazakhstan is focusing on enhancing the quality and accessibility of communications services, developing cross-border electronic document management, strengthening integration, and creating joint projects in the EAEU space.

Latvia's prime minister said that traders are using Turkey, Kazakhstan and Armenia to evade European Union sanctions on Russia in a tactic that breaches these countries' compliance with the bloc's embargo.

Kazakhstan has sought ways to decrease its dependence on Russian exporting routes as it has often faced difficulties in selling oil through Russia. Kazakh oil is not subject to Western sanctions, unlike Russian crude, although the sanctions have created problems for some Kazakh products.

Contraband remains a booming business on the Sino-Kazakh border, over a year after Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev ordered customs officials to root it out. The value of goods being exported from China into Kazakhstan is allegedly being under-reported by more than a third.

Kazakhstan has banned the export of fuels for four months regardless of the mode of transportation, beginning February 18, 2023. The country is banning exports of gasoline, diesel, and certain types of other oil products. The purpose of the ban is to ensure enough fuel supply domestically and prevent shortages. The ban in Kazakhstan came days after the EU embargo on imports of Russian fuels and the price cap on diesel and other products came into effect on February 5.

India-Central Asia Relations

The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) signed two Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with auditing authorities of Tajikistan and Kazakhstan on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Supreme Audit Institutions (SCO SAI) Leaders' meeting. The agreements are aimed at strengthening cooperation and exchange of expertise between the nations in the field of auditing. The MoUs will also provide a platform for the exchange of auditing professionals and technical teams, collaboration in training programmes, and mutual assistance in conducting audits. The agreements are a step forward in promoting closer ties and collaboration among the Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) of the three nations. The MoU with SAI Tajikistan will help develop and strengthen professional capacity and improve methodologies in the field of audit. Both SAIs also agreed to explore means of capacity development support and cooperate on areas that are mutually beneficial. CAG of India Girish Chandra Murmu said that this MoU was a reaffirmation of the values and goals that the two institutions share over a long period and a cementing of the ties that already exist between the two nations. High-level delegations from eight SCO member countries participated in the three-day multilateral event that deliberated on issues related to cyber security and artificial intelligence and the role of auditors of SCO nations. CAG Murmu led discussions on the theme 'Integrating Emerging Technologies in Audit.'

NGOs from several countries including Islamic nations working on social harmony and unity of religions resolved to prepare a charter for harmony and peace. At an international seminar held in New Delhi, the participants authorized Indresh Kumar, leader of the Rashtriya Swayem Sevak Sangh (RSS) to prepare the draft of the charter. The idea was put forth at

the two-day seminar on the theme 'India and Central Asia Historical, Cultural and Economic Connectivity' held in JNU. The charter addressed issues that are the source of conflict between followers of different religions. Besides India, the countries that took part in the seminar included Islamic countries like Iran, Turkey, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Buddhist-dominant Mongolia, and Christian Armenia. The seminar also discussed terrorism. All participants condemned it. Indresh Kumar described terrorism as an enemy of peace, development, harmony, and humanity. All speakers agreed that they will not allow their land to be used for terrorism. The seminar concluded that criticism of any religion, scriptures, shrines, or religious personalities like God, Goddesses, deities, Prophets, and violence in their name to create anarchy was condemnable. It asked people of all religions to give importance to peace, unity, brotherhood, and harmony instead of insulting other religions. Indresh Kumar said that the ban on religious conversions is necessary for world peace and development. He urged the representatives of Muslim countries to speak up against religious conversions.

India presently holds the Shanghai Cooperation Group (SCO) presidency. It stated that it expects all members including Pakistan to attend the various meetings organized by it. India has sent invitations to all members of the SCO including to Pakistan and China to the forthcoming foreign ministers' meeting in Goa on 4-5 May. India has also invited the chief justice of Pakistan to the meeting of chief justices of the SCO in March, 2023.

The 36th edition of the Surajkund International Crafts Mela, showcasing the cultural fabric of the country, with SCO members as the partner nations was held from 3rd to 19th February, 2023. Besides the SCO, 40 other countries, including Russia, Turkey, Cambodia, and the United Arab Emirates, participated in the event. The mela is one of the largest handicraft and cultural fairs in the country and saw around 50,000 visitors daily on weekdays and about 100,000 on weekends. Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar termed Haryana a key investment destination and invited the SCO member countries to invest in the state. The participation of various SCO countries in this mela is very pivotal as artists of every country proudly displayed their unique culture and showcased the best of its heritage in the form of handicrafts and performing arts.

Marathi Film Godavari was judged the best film at the SCO Film Festival held recently in Mumbai. The film tells the story of a family living on the banks of Godavari river in Nashik. Kazakh actor Askar Ilyasov won the Best Actor (male) for Paralympian while Rano Shodiyeva from Uzbekistan won the Best Actor (female) award for The Fate of a Woman. Russian film, Don't Bury Me Without Ivan directed by Liubov Borisova bagged a Special Jury Award while the Kyrgyz film The Road to Eden directed by Bakyt Mukul & Dastan Zhapar received special mention from the jury for the message of hope and warning about the risk of losing cultural values in turbulent times. The Jury also found it pertinent to award a special mention to Tajik film Fortune directed by Muhyiddin Muzaffar for the remarkable actor's ensemble immersing

the audience into experiencing the value of true friendship. A total of 58 films from 14 countries were showcased under competition and non-competition sections.

As part of the tourism track activities under India's chairship of the SCO, Ministry of Tourism planned various activities such as SCO Tourism Mart during SATTE (South Asia's Travel and Tourism Exchange) from February 9-11. An SCO Expert Level Tourism Working Group Meeting and SCO Tourism Minister's Meeting in Varanasi was held from March 13-17 and SCO Food Festival in Mumbai will be held from April 13-19. India conceptualized an SCO Tourism Mart along with SATTE to promote the SCO brand of tourism. This will provide an opportunity to the member countries, observer countries and dialogue partners of SCO fraternity to showcase their varied tourism products and cultural assets.

Pakistan has indicated that it will go on with the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project even without India as Afghanistan is willing to offer more support. Turkmenistan is eager to move forward with the project and Pakistan is willing to implement it as soon as possible, even without India's participation. If India decides to leave the project, Pakistan is reportedly willing to purchase India's proposed share of gas. However, Pakistan acknowledged that Afghanistan's security and political situation remains a challenge for the TAPI project. Pakistan believes that the security issue can be addressed if favorable conditions are created, including increasing the stakes for Afghanistan, pointing out that transit revenue from the pipeline would make up around 80 to 85 percent of Afghanistan's annual budget, making it crucial for them to ensure its security.

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