Recent developments in Kazakhstan have attracted widespread attention. For a while they have been the main discussion point of the entire global community. This is understandable, since Kazakhstan is the largest country in Central Asia, a region that has a significant impact on the developments in the larger Indo-Pacific region, that has already overtaken the Euro-Atlantic in some regards.

There is hardly any need to explain why, when talking about the complex of issues that have arisen in relation to the events in Kazakhstan, the position of China, one of the world’s leading powers that cannot turn a blind eye to what is happening in the region where it is based.

In this context it should be noted that the one-off measures taken by Russia (through the CSTO instrument) to curb the dangerous turbulence that has arisen in Kazakhstan have won the explicit approval of Beijing.

China’s position on the suddenly aggravated (but in fact long-simmering) Kazakhstan issue is influenced by several factors, which are interrelated to varying degrees. First, note that unrest in Kazakhstan emerged against the
backdrop of the Afghanistan issue, elevated to a new level in August 2021, which in turn increased its role as a destabilizing factor in Central Asia. It is possible that the former was in a way influenced by the latter.

Second, for Beijing, the direct contiguity of the Central Asia sub-region with the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China is of crucial importance. Both XUAR and Central Asia are inhabited by religiously and often ethnically close peoples. Meanwhile, 5-10 years ago, the situation in the XUAR was very turbulent, and Beijing had to use a combination of measures (political and organizational, policing and economic) to stabilize it. Beijing’s fears about the possibility of turbulence shifting to XUAR from Central Asia seem well-founded. In addition, the whole sub-region is becoming increasingly important to China as a source of various natural resources. This is also one of the transport routes of the key Belt and Road Initiative project.

Third, the above-mentioned measures and the overall situation in XUAR (as well as in the Tibet Autonomous Region and Hong Kong) have in recent years been at the forefront of propaganda attacks against China by its main geopolitical opponent, the US, with some support from certain allies (Japan, the United Kingdom, the EU leadership). A potential strengthening of the US position in Central Asia would dramatically increase the effectiveness of these attacks, as well as create problems for the implementation of China’s economic projects in the sub-region.

Fourth, Beijing is forced to pay attention to Turkey’s political ambitions (even though these are completely at odds with its available economic assets) and attempts to extend them to Central Asia, using, in particular, ethno-religious and language affinities between some of the peoples in the sub-region and Turkey. A few years ago, President Erdoğan went as far as almost making threatening gestures towards Beijing over China’s actions in XUAR. Along with attempts to flirt with Japan, this will surely sooner or later come back to bite Ankara. During the forthcoming talks in Beijing on the situation in Kazakhstan, Erdoğan’s emissaries will undoubtedly try to “smooth over” the negative impression of these earlier remarks.

Fifth, the signs of the United Kingdom’s penetration into the sub-region (primarily in Kazakhstan) with its claims to return to global politics, in which anti-Chinese motives are becoming more and more visible, hardly evoke positive emotions in Beijing.

Finally, India’s long-standing interest in what is happening in Central Asia is gaining significance in Beijing’s eyes. In this regard, let us look again at the Delhi Dialogue held on December 18-19, whose participants, besides the host of the event, included the foreign ministers of the five Central Asian countries. The importance attached by the Indian leadership to this meeting is confirmed by the fact that the leaders of the guest countries have been invited to the forthcoming Republic Day, the main national holiday, celebrated annually on January 26. Such invitations are exceptional, and the total number of invitations issued over the decades is in the single digits.

This is the general background that Beijing undoubtedly took into account when assessing both what happened in early January 2022 in Kazakhstan and Moscow’s actions to stabilize the country.

The framework for these assessments was set by China’s President Xi Jinping in his spoken address to President Tokayev on January 7. This “address”, in addition to expressing condolences for the human and material losses of Kazakhstan as a result of the unrest, commended decisive measures “to restore calm.” It also stated that China opposes the instigation by outside forces of “color revolutions” and attempts to undermine China-Kazakhstan friendship. On behalf of his country, the Chinese leader expressed his willingness to give Kazakhstan “all possible assistance” in overcoming the consequences of the unrest.

On January 10, China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in a telephone conversation with his Kazakhstani counterpart Mukhtar Tileuberdi, also praised the measures taken by Kazakhstan’s leadership to end the violence and expressed willingness to help counter the acts of “interference and infiltration by any outside forces.” Tokayev’s intention to attend the opening ceremony of the forthcoming Winter Olympic Games to be held in February this year in China was also welcomed. It should be recalled that the US and its main allies had declared a “diplomatic boycott” of the Beijing Olympics in connection with the events in XUAR.

According to reports of Wang Yi’s telephone conversation on the same day with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov, Moscow and Beijing share a similar assessment of both what happened in Kazakhstan and the timeliness and adequacy of the measures taken by the CSTO to end the unrest in the country.

Finally, it seems appropriate to reiterate the need for developing comprehensive cooperation between Russia and China. A cooperation which, again, is important for both sides in and of itself, and not because someone is “pushing” them towards it. Still, the importance of geopolitical expediency cannot be denied either.
In Central Asia in particular, the Chinese-Russian “shoulder-to-shoulder” positioning could be a good recipe for ridding local political adventurers of all sorts of illusions. Specifically those adventurers who both implicitly and explicitly encourage anti-Russian and anti-Chinese sentiments, practice varying kinds of “multi-vector diplomacy,” and advocate joining the concept of the “Great Turan.”

The same positioning could prove an equally effective barrier to those who try to revive the “Great Game” played in the region in the mid-to late 19th century. At the same time, they are building their own barrier between Russia and “old Europe” out of the waste material in the form of all sorts of “independent” Eastern European limitrophes.

The author would like to reiterate here the increasing importance of the nature of India’s positioning in the IPR in general and particularly in relation to the situation in Central Asia. In this regard, the emerging process of reducing tensions in the border areas separating India and China is of paramount importance.

This, however, is a topic worthy of a separate article.

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