

Kazakhstan's New President Faces His First Test: Anti-Chinese Protests

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New Kazakhstani President Tokayev is facing his first real test as the country's leader after low-intensity anti-Chinese protests broke out in three main cities in response to concerns that the Central Asian state is becoming much too dependent on its eastern neighbor, with this sudden outbreak of small-scale unrest inconveniently (but not un-coincidentally) occurring just a week before his upcoming visit to the People's Republic and dangerously showing signs of Color Revolution potential.

An [anti-Chinese protest movement](#) has suddenly broke out in three of Kazakhstan's main cities just a week before the country's new leader visits the People's Republic, with this low-level but nevertheless potentially dangerous unrest being President Tokayev's first real test since entering office [a few months ago](#). The western city of Zhanaozen was the scene of the first such demonstrations when 300 people demanded that no Chinese-financed factories be built in their region following rumors that they might be constructed in the coming future. Zhanaozen is significant because it suffered from [short-lived but deadly riots](#) in December 2011 that were quickly put down by the authorities within a day, which is why international observers are keeping an eye on the latest developments there. Copycat protests by only several dozen people have since spread to the former capital of Almaty and the current one of recently renamed Nur-Sultan, which while seemingly irrelevant in a country of approximately 18 million people could nevertheless catalyze a proto-[Color Revolution](#) depending on the state's response.

Growing Chinese influence in Kazakhstan is a very emotive topic following the spread of the US' dual infowars against its chief global geopolitical adversary, the first of which [alleges](#) that the communist country is secretly using its [Belt & Road Initiative](#) (BRI) to "colonize" its partners while the second one [purports](#) that the People's Republic is brutally suppressing its Muslim minorities (including ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang) out of pure hatred for Islam. Neither narrative is true, though it's understandable that some of its targeted audience might easily be misled through the selective reporting of facts and the outright propagation of fake news. Furthermore, despite being the most socio-economically developed Central Asian state, Kazakhstan is having trouble diversifying its economy beyond its energy-exporting dependence, and it's always convenient for blue-collar workers to blame foreigners for their troubles instead of accepting some hard economic realities. That said, it's ironic that China has become the object of their anger because its BRI investments will actually real helpful.

The Eurasian Land Bridge, one of BRI's megaprojects, is envisaged to connect Western Europe with East Asia via Kazakhstan and Russia, to which end China intends to invest heavily in these two transit states in order to facilitate trade and add value to products along the way. In pursuit of this, China provides low-interest loans in order to help all of its

global partners, Kazakhstan included, so one would naturally expect its people to be in favor of China's growing role in their country. Some of them aren't, however, such as the protesters who are also calling on President Tokayev to stop accepting Chinese loans. They believe that this puts their country's sovereignty at stake and contributes to corruption, though as is typical of most contemporary protest movements, they aren't offering any alternative solution that they believe would be better. Instead, the demonstrators are clearly trying to incite public anger by using the controversial issue of Chinese influence and fearmongering about their neighbor's supposed "neo-imperial" and "anti-Islamic" designs, which is a very dangerous political game to play.

By the looks of it, the agitators don't have much public support even if some members of the population might partially sympathize with the narratives that they're spreading, whether because they're misinformed or truly believe them. In any case, the timing of the protests isn't coincidental since they're clearly intended to generate international attention ahead of President Tokayev's visit to China, after which they might turn violent in order to provoke the police into forcefully responding so that they can revive memories of the 2011 riots in Zhanaozen and also spread the new infowar narrative that the Kazakh leader is a "Chinese puppet killing his own people at the anti-Islamic communists' behest". That turn of events might be enough to encourage more people to take to the streets and protest against so-called "police brutality" and then use that as the basis for demanding the resignation of security and political officials, thus manufacturing a crisis in this ultra-geostrategic state where there otherwise would never have been one.

It's impossible for most states to wield full control over domestic narratives in this time and age given the recent information-communication technology (ICT) revolution and the prevalence of social media, let alone for the governments of comparatively smaller non-Western countries to positively influence international coverage during periods of unrest, so Kazakhstan needs to accept that it'll remain forever vulnerable to infowar-driven Color Revolution attempts — whether genuinely indigenous or influenced from abroad — and should therefore exercise the utmost caution in formulating its on-the-ground response to the latest low-level unrest. Incipient [HybridWars](#) capitalize off of their target's overreactions, as well as local footage of the aforesaid being decontextualized and manipulated to provoke more anti-government protests, so Kazakhstan should take care not to fall into this trap.

President Tokayev should also ensure that the reasons for his upcoming trip to China and the tangible benefits of the Kazakhstani-Chinese Strategic Partnership are clearly articulated to the population in order to counteract the misinformation that's being spread. By appreciating the part that their country plays in the [emerging Multipolar World Order](#), as well as physically benefiting from this role, ordinary citizens will become less vulnerable to anti-Chinese infowars and therefore increasingly unlikely to be lured into Color Revolution schemes. If forced by circumstances to actively respond to the protests before or during President Tokayev's visit, the police should make sure that they have their own footage of what happened in order to debunk claims that they "mercilessly attacked peaceful civilians" and to show that they were compelled to do so in order to maintain law and order following attacks against the authorities or whatever else might have provoked their crackdown. With all of this in mind, there isn't any reason to over-exaggerate the impact of these protests, but they nevertheless represent a latent threat that should also be taken seriously in the long term.

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