

US and Turkey Challenge CSTO's Peacekeeping Mission in Kazakhstan

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The first week of 2022 began with protests in Kazakhstan over rising LPG prices. The protests quickly devolved into destruction, killings and a dissolved government. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev described the violence as “an act of aggression” from the outside and requested assistance from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The CSTO peacekeepers arrived in Kazakhstan to protect the country’s infrastructure and conduct counter-terrorism operations, such as arresting or exterminating armed militants. However, despite serving as peacekeepers, the US and Turkey are desperate to undermine the CSTO from performing its duties.

At first, the protests that broke out across Kazakhstan appeared not to be well organized and rather spontaneous. However, just three days later, armed men opened fire on Kazakh police and security forces. At least 164 Kazakhs have been killed, media outlets burned, police departments destroyed, and even airports and hospitals attacked. Western media blamed Kazakh security forces for opening fire on the protesters and started releasing unverified figures from unreliable sources to justify criticism of Kazakh authorities, akin to how the so-called Maidan Revolution occurred in Ukraine in early 2014.

The Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan Party and the Oyan Qazaqstan Party led the protests, and unsurprisingly are the two most pronounced pro-Western and anti-Russian political organizations in the country. As the ruling government has failed to find a policy of compromise between different political groups, outside forces have taken advantage of this situation to incite riots.

It is also worth noting that even within the ruling Kazakh government, anti-Russian ideology has begun to appear at the highest level. Over the past two years, Prime Minister Askar Mamin has become closer to ultranationalist forces and pro-Western opposition groups with anti-Russian sentiments. This factor is also a reason why Tokayev demanded the resignation of Mamin and the election of First Deputy Prime Minister Alikhan Smailov instead.

On the basis of the country's constitution and laws, as well as its commitments to rights and responsibilities within CSTO, Kazakhstan had the right to call for intervention from the Russian-led bloc, especially when remembering that violence became so brutal that a police officer was beheaded. The CSTO mission prevents Kazakhstan from the tragic situation that befell Ukraine in 2014.

The Central Asian country's security and defense apparatus needs to be rearranged to be more readily prepared for future color revolution attempts and external interference. Moscow too would be concerned about the arrival of color revolutions in Central Asia, a region where Turkey is also making inroads to impose its own influence.

"We hope that Kazakhstan will reach stability, peace and tranquility as soon as possible. For this, as Turkey and the Organization of Turkic States, we will give all kinds of support," Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said at a meeting held by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) on January 9. "The problems of the member countries of the Turkic world are our problems. The whole world has seen it during the Karabakh victory [of Azerbaijan against Armenia]."

The 2020 Karabakh War was an emboldened attempt by Turkey to expand its influence in the South Caucasus, ultimately at Moscow's expense, but something that was averted with much frustration in Ankara due to the presence of Russian peacekeepers. In this way, Çavuşoğlu is effectively announcing that Turkey is willing to once again act brazenly within Russia's traditional sphere of influence without consulting Moscow. Ankara hopes that the Organization of Turkic States will become the main mechanism for Central Asian and South Caucasian issues to be discussed and resolved, thus supplanting not only CSTO, but also the Russia-led Commonwealth of Independent States, in which again Kazakhstan is a founding member.

Meanwhile, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki curiously said at press conference on January 6, despite no journalist asking the question, that the US had nothing to do with the events in Kazakhstan, without failing to mention Russia of course.

"There are some crazy Russian claims about the US being behind this. Let me just use this opportunity to convey that as absolutely false, and clearly a part of the standard Russian disinformation playbook," she said.

The next day, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said: "I think one lesson in recent history is that once Russians are in your house, it's sometimes very difficult to get them to leave." He also questioned Kazakhstan's request for CSTO peacekeepers.

As the US opposes the deployment of CSTO peacekeepers and Ankara continues its attempts to increase its influence in Central Asia by pushing for the utilization of the Organization of Turkic States to resolve the Kazakhstan issue, Russia is once again being challenged by NATO states in its own neighborhood. This comes as the West and Turkey are also supporting Ukraine to varying degrees against Russia in a similar manner, demonstrating the broad pressure Moscow is facing.

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