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KAZAKHSTAN'S ECONOMIC AND FOREIGN POLICIES: NOTES FROM ASTANA - II

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The Astana International Forum (AIF) was a grandiose two-day event on 8-9 June 2023. The Forum was not only a platform to discuss topical issues concerning Kazakhstan and Central Asia, but also an image-building spectacle through which Astana intended to convey its messages to the world. For that, the organizers of the Forum placed a premium on the media component of the event. Accordingly, in addition to reporters from different national and international media, over 50 journalists from all over the world were invited to the Forum. One day before the Forum, Minister of National Economy of Kazakhstan Alibek Kuantyrov and the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan Roman Vassilenko met with these journalists. In the previous article of this series, takeaways from the meeting with Minister Kuantyrov were presented. This article will focus on the meeting with Deputy Minister Vassilenko.

Kazakhstan as a Euro-Asian Country

At the meeting, Deputy Minister Vassilenko began his remarks by referring to the historical Silk Road that connected Asia and Europe for centuries. He underscored Kazakhstans geographical location in the middle of Eurasia at the crossroads of the East-West and North-South routes. This depiction of the country is central to Kazakhstans narrative of its unique cultural, national, and geopolitical identity as a Euro-Asian country. The Kazakh national narrative that stems from Kazakh self-perception, in its turn, lays the foundations of the countrys vision of its political and economic relations with the world. To sketch out briefly, Kazakhstan envisages itself as a cultural, economic, and political bridge between the East and the West, and the North and the South. As shall be discussed below, as a derivative to this understanding, Kazakhstan pursues a foreign policy outlook that envisions building functioning political and economic ties with any willing country. This

inclines Astana to pursue a pragmatic, multivector foreign policy and embrace multilateralism.

Trans-border Transport Infrastructures

Kazakhstans location is a blessing, but it is also a challenge. Being landlocked and far from the seas and oceans at the heart of Eurasia, Kazakhstan fell outside of the main trading routes after the age of discoveries in the 15th and 16th centuries. As Deputy Minister Vassilenko stressed in his remarks, Astana strives to overcome this challenge by developing trans-border transport infrastructures and being a part of international transportation routes. Astana projects that this would not only facilitate Kazakhstans physical connection with world markets but also render the country a transport, economic and trade hub in Central Asia. For this reason, As Vassilenko stressed, developing the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route -the Middle Corridor - is a perspective that Astana attaches the uttermost importance.

Less Polarized World Order

Deputy Minister Vassilenko described the Astana International Forum as the voice of the countries who aspire to a less polarized international order. This was an expression of the Kazakh concerns about the risk of being dragged into big power conflicts directly or indirectly that would force Kazakhstan to compromise its national interests. It can be seen that Astana is quite mindful of this jeopardy. Accordingly, being deliberative to avoid taking sides between competing big powers has become an important element of the Kazakh outlook. Experiences from the past (such as the Russian colonization of Central Asia), lessons from the present (such as the Ukraine-Russia war), and the geographical realities of the country (such as neighboring two giants, i.e., Russia and China) are certainly the factors that shape this outlook. Among these factors, the Ukraine-Russia war is arguably the prime one for the time being.

The Ukraine-Russia War

Astana is anxious about the war in the north of the Black Sea. The concerns of Astana are rooted in three considerations. First, Astana is distressed about the economic consequences of the war. Deputy Minister Vassilenko explained that the war harms the supply chain and transportation in Central Asia causing inflation and other problems. Secondly, as a Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) member country, Kazakhstan feels the negative impacts of the anti-Russian sanctions of the collective West. In addition to these,

allegations about Kazakh companies role in getting over the sanctions regime also trouble Astana. Secondary sanctions and the possibility of economic pressures are the other issues that preoccupy Kazakh officials. As to that, Vassilenko underlined that Astana is determined not to let the sanctions be breached via Kazakhstan.

In addition to the economic consequences, the geopolitical implications of the war are also a concern for Astana. Rising polarization and the possibility of being pressured to take sides in the conflict worries Kazakh officials. Thirdly, Kazakh officials are alarmed about the impacts of the war on the multiethnic Kazakh society. Up to 20% of the Kazakh population is composed of ethnic Slavs, i.e., ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarussians. Underscoring the importance of societal peace and harmony, Deputy Minister Vassilenko stated that the war in Ukraine causes friction and fragmentation among the ethnic Slavs in Kazakhstan.

Frankly, Vassilenkos argument is an unanticipated explanation since there are no indications of such a fragmentation among the ethnic Slavs in Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, the Deputy Ministers emphasis on the societal impacts of the Ukraine-Russia war reveals the worries of the Kazakh officials no matter the real reasons for these worries being openly uttered or not. Arguably, a more accurate cause of the worries may be the possibility of rising ethnic nationalism among the Slavic population of Kazakhstan which may have negative effects on the national cohesion in the country. It would not be a surprise if the insolent and irredentist statements of some Russian officials and lawmakers about Kazakhstan and its territorial integrity rise concerns of the Kazakh officials in this regard.

Multivector Foreign Policy and Multilateralism

If Kazakhstans foreign policy concept was to be summarized with two words, these would be multivectorism and multilateralism. These were, indeed, the main points of emphasis of Deputy Minister Vassilenko in his remarks.

For Kazakhstan, multivector foreign policy is the main policy means to avoid being trapped in zero-sum games set by great power competitions. Kazakhstans membership in different organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS); its resolution to deepen economic and trade relations with the EU, while being an EAEU country; and participation in different multilateral formats between the Central Asian republics and the US, EU, China, and Japan are the reflections of Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy in practice.

In addition to multivectorism, multilateralism is another pillar of Kazakh foreign policy. Deputy Minister Vassilenko put that as multilateralism being the only right direction for Kazakhstan as a middle power. It can be seen that Astana regarding itself as a middle power sees no alternative to multilateralism to pursue its interests in the international domain. Last but not least, embracing multivector foreign policy and multilateralism, Kazakhstan pursues a foreign policy that aims to increase the number of its international friends and partners to widen its opportunities for cooperation. It also advocates the primacy of international law and diplomatic solutions in international affairs.

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All in all, what can be deduced from the statements of the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan Roman Vassilenko is that over the course of years, Kazakhstan has developed a solid and realistic understanding about the challenges and opportunities the country faces. It can be seen that, to extend its opportunities in the international arena, Astana attaches great importance to developing trans-border critical infrastructure that would render it a central state at the heart of the Eurasian landmass. Besides, it can also be understood that for Astana, not being a part of competitions and rivalries among the great powers is the first condition to pursue national interests. According to Astana, this is only possible by pursuing a multivector foreign policy and defending multilateralism, diplomacy, and international law in the international domain. This is a position, which, indeed, is shared by most of the Global South middle powers.

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