



## COMMENT 240 - Kazakhstan and the Russian debacle

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'Now is not the time for war' was the concise and sharp public <u>message</u> that Prime-Minister Modi left in his bilateral meeting with President Putin. It will remain as the most impressive memory from the 'Shanghai Cooperation Organisation' <u>2022</u> summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, held on the sixteenth of September.

Prime-minister Modi's message, forcing President Putin to publicly acknowledge his fragile stand on the Russian invasion, stands in a sharp contrast with the media saga of repeated bilateral phone-calls between President Putin and both President Macron and Chancellor Scholz, which at the time gave an impression of European clumsiness and incapacity facing a firm and committed Putin.

Russia's recent defeats on its European military adventure, despite ruthless tactics and heavy commitment, are being sensed as a prelude to a new Russian imperial debacle. Armed conflicts resumed in both the <u>Azerbaijan – Armenia</u> and the <u>Kyrgyzstan – Tajikistan</u> borders; all four countries were formerly part of the USSR, and in both conflicts Russia appears as unable to achieve any results as a peace mediator.

In Samarkand, other than the public rebuke received from Prime-minister Modi, President Putin was forced to avow that the <u>Chinese President</u> was not happy either with the situation in Ukraine. This is most remarkable, as all the initial public declarations and acts by the Chinese leadership at the time of invasion – namely <u>coordinating</u> its timing with the Beijing winter Olympics – pointed to a support by Chinese authorities to the Russian aggression.

The reversal of Russian fortunes was most obvious in Kazakhstan. The Russian intervention in the country at the beginning of 2022 was widely seen as a major success, a sign of life for the Russian-led 'Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)' – as it was the first time the clauses of mutual assistance were implemented – and, most importantly, as the title of a <u>Nikkei report</u> on the issue affirms, a sign that 'Kazakhstan's mission leaves lingering boot prints'.

## COMMENT



However, nothing happened as expected. Less than a week after the arrival of Russian troops, president Tokayev <u>announced</u> its rapid withdrawal in a public communication . France 24's press report (as well as several other press reports consulted) did not mention any words of gratitude by president Tokayev regarding the Russian intervention.

According to an analysis by Aliya Askar – pseudonym for a Kazakh researcher writing in the Diplomat (<u>Askar, 2022.03.07</u>) addressing the assumed debt from Kazakhstan towards Russia – 'if there is a "debt," Nur-Sultan isn't paying it'.

More than not paying debts, Nur-Sultan has excelled in every way to mark its differences with Moscow, including applying sanctions against Russia and even possibly supplying the Ukrainian army with weapons:

'Russian pro-government media and Telegram channels claim that Kazakhstan has gone so far as to supply Ukraine with arms. The allegations are based on a supposedly leaked contract under which the Kazakh company Technoexport is purported to be exporting Soviet-era weapons and ammunition to Ukraine via Jordan and the United Kingdom. Kazakhstan officially rejects those allegations, but whether it is sending arms to Ukraine or not, it is obvious that Kazakhstan is trying to alienate itself from its toxic ally Russia' (Umarov, T., 2022.09.16).

Relevant analyses of the Kazakh January 2022 events (as for instance, <u>Junisbai</u>, <u>A</u>. <u>2022.05.20</u>) support president Tokayev's claim that it was a failed coup event rather than a spontaneous popular protest; however, many are more doubtful that this coup could have been organised by former President Nazarbayev's circles, as he also claims.

The only possible foreign connections to this coup were publicly but loosely identified by Tokayev as 'foreign-aided terrorist and criminal groups' (Eurasianet, 2022.01.06).

The beheading of Kazakh soldiers appear as a quite distinctive trait of a Jihadi connection, but otherwise, the more precise claims blaming Jihadists for the unrest were those by Russian officials:

"We consider these latest events in our ally nation a foreign-inspired attempt to use violence and trained, organized armed bands to undermine the security and territorial integrity of the state," the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

'If Kazakh officials are being circumspect about whom exactly they blame for the violence in Almaty, Russian lawmakers have been bolder. Russian Senator Konstantin Kosachev, chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, said protesters in Kazakhstan included militants drawn from the ranks of armed gangs operating in "the Middle East, primarily in Afghanistan." Ruslan Balbek, an MP in the State Duma, meanwhile, said he detected the involvement of the Islamic State group' (Eurasianet, 2022.01.06).





The interpretation of the coup by Kazakh authorities evolved. Some days later, Madina Ashilova (2022.01.20) stated:

'We now think that the "terrorists" were mostly local bandits, who had been training systematically for a long time. Many of them adhere to non-traditional Islam – Salafism – which has been flourishing in the country in recent years. They have links to the National Security Committee, the Kazakhstan intelligence agency. Who organized all these disturbances and attacks and how and why they did it are still unknown. It seems clear that there was criminal if not treasonous behavior – how else to explain police inaction as looting broke out across the city? Was it really foreign militants who cut off soldiers' heads?' Ashilova also said in the same article:

'Russia offers reliable protection against any manifestation of terrorism and extremism in our country. They are the main factor that has stopped the Taliban, Islamic State, the Mujahideen and other groups from penetrating the country. In Central Asia, terrorists and extremists pose a far greater threat than Russia, especially after the recent developments in Afghanistan.'

Ashilova's benevolent interpretation of the Russian intervention on the crisis is quite distinct from the one shown by the Kazakh authorities now, and it was possibly not their interpretation already at the time.

Most analyses – such as the above-quoted one from Umarov (2022.09.16) – align a vast array of reasons for the Kazakh distancing from Russia; however, without showing clear temporal coincidences. Furthermore, none can explain why the help of Russia to Belarus' quelling of popular unrest led to such different results to the apparently similar Russian intervention in Kazakhstan.

It is most noteworthy that Russian troops were able to be deployed within a day of officially being called by President Tokayev (<u>Radio Liberty, 2022.01.06</u>), as it is also astonishing that no follow-up of the suspected foreign Islamist activity was undertaken.

If the succession of obvious steps by the Kazakh authorities to distant themselves from Russia failed to impress either the European or the United States diplomacies much, the same is not the case for China. <u>President Xi</u>'s first foreign trip after the start of the pandemic travel restriction's was to visit Kazakhstan, where he provided security insurances so ostensibly floundering from the Russian side. It was a prelude to Samarkand's show of Chinese power and Russian weakness.

Whereas one should not underestimate the possibility that Russia could reverse its present negative course, right now this does not seem likely. The consequences of such tectonic shifts of power are being openly felt in Kazakhstan; however, they will also impact other regions, including South Asia.



## COMMENT

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