



Russian Intervention in Kazakhstan Risks Further Destabilization Amid the Unrest in the Country

After inviting Russian soldiers into the country to resolve domestic instability, some have expressed concern with the Kazakh government's political dependence and ties to its neighbor. The United States, the European Union, and others voiced worry regarding the potential prospect of destabilization and further Kremlin involvement in the internal affairs of nearby countries – particularly due to the situation taking place in Ukraine as well. As a result of the unrest in Kazakhstan, hundreds have been killed and thousands more detained. What had begun as protests against rising fuel prices turned into anger over government corruption and economic stagnation, with observers lamenting the Kazakh government's attempts to blame the unrest on outside forces rather than domestic displeasure with a repressive regime. As part of its response, the government severed internet access and mobile networks in the country in order to limit communication among civilians and protesters. President Tokayev's declaration of a state of emergency also included a shoot-to-kill order for police and security forces, which United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken and other prominent officials spoke out against and relayed alarm with.

The European Union is evaluating what actions it can take against the Kazakh government to send the message that leaders cannot inflict ruthless violence on civilians who are demonstrating against economic inequality and other legitimate contentions. Kazakhstan is one of the resource-richest countries in the world with a relatively small and wealthy elite, and much of the recent unrest stems from a sentiment of inequity among a substantial portion of the population. The country has an authoritarian government with the previous president ruling for multiple decades and retaining control of the National Security Council after leaving the presidency. 2,500 Russian soldiers were invited by current Kazakhstan President Tokayev as part of a security alliance between the two countries called the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Under CSTO rules, member states can only move soldiers to other member states in response to what they deem to be external threats.

During the unrest, some protesters forced their way into government buildings, set fire to government property, and violently clashed with police. They appeared disorganized and without leadership or agenda other than demands for higher salaries and the dissolution of President Tokayev's government. As a result of the unrest, the government announced that it would place a 180-day cap on fuel prices, the ministerial cabinet resigned, and the former president was removed from his position at the head of the National Security Council. Violent response by the government to protesters has occurred as recently as 2011. Government soldiers fired into a group of oil workers who had been on strike for months; they killed 14 and wounded hundreds.

The importance of Kazakhstan to the U.S. reached beyond the billions of dollars American-owned companies – such as Chevron and ExxonMobil – have invested there. The exportation of oil and coal to China, with whom Kazakhstan shares a lengthy border, has been observed by U.S. officials for some time. More than this though is the relevance of Kazakhstan to the United States' ongoing counter-terrorism operations in the region; with Kazakhstan being a willing partner in these efforts throughout the course of recent years.