Russian Military Intervention in Kazakhstan

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Key Points

- Kazakhstan’s size and Russia’s lack of significant military presence in the region make outright invasion unlikely.
- Nevertheless, the death or deposition of Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev could generate regional instability, which may prompt Russia to intervene in support of a new regime or to undermine a newly empowered Kazakh nationalist one.
- The likeliest cause of intervention would be to put down an Islamist insurgency, either with or without a request from Astana.

Although a Russian military intervention in Kazakhstan is fairly unlikely, there are scenarios under which it could occur. This report first describes several possible scenarios that might result in such an intervention, considering potential Russian responses that range from providing assistance at the request of Kazakhstan’s government to an outright invasion. It then briefly examines the forces Russia could bring to bear in a conflict in Central Asia, looking in slightly more depth at the likeliest scenario—a Russian intervention to suppress an Islamist incursion or uprising.

Possible Scenarios for Intervention in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan’s size would make Russia reluctant to undertake a full-scale military intervention. Still, there are circumstances under which the Russian leadership would feel pressure to use force to intervene in Kazakhstan.

The greatest potential threat to political stability in Kazakhstan would come from the death or incapacity of Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev. Such a situation could be followed by a succession crisis, with multiple groups jockeying for position.

If prolonged government weakness or conflict ensues, radical Islamist groups connected to the Taliban or the Islamic State could seize the opportunity to launch an armed insurgency, potentially combined with an incursion from the south. A weak or divided Kazakhstan government might prove incapable of resisting a well-organized insurgency, especially if the anti-government forces are able to draw on the support of local inhabitants in the more religious (Islamic) southern parts of the country. In such a situation, Kazakhstani leaders might request assistance from Russia. Russia might also intervene on its own without a request for help, but only if Kazakhstan were largely engulfed by instability and Russia wanted to protect its borders or ethnic Russians living in areas near Russia that were under threat.

Although the threat from religious extremist groups is real, it requires some degree of state weakness or division to develop. While scholars have long argued that a crisis precipitated by the death of an aging leader could provide such an opportunity in any of
the Central Asia states, the two cases so far of leaders dying in office in Central Asia (Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) have both resulted in fairly smooth leadership transitions.

A second, though relatively unlikely, possibility is that Nazarbayev’s death coincides with a difficult period in Russian domestic politics for the Vladimir Putin regime. Whether because of economic problems or political weakness vis-à-vis younger politicians, Putin and his circle might choose to reenact the Crimea scenario in Kazakhstan. The goal would be to boost the regime’s popularity through another injection of militarized patriotism by annexing a territory with a predominantly Russian population. Such territories are located in the north and northeast of the country, directly adjacent to Russian territory. Counting on support from at least some of the local ethnic Russians, Moscow could seek to annex the territories around Petropavlovsk and Kustanay in the north or the territory around Ust-Kamenogorsk in the northeast.

Somewhat paradoxically, a third scenario for Russian intervention could follow a smooth transition of power. In this case, Nazarbayev could be succeeded by a leader who begins to implement a Kazakh nationalist agenda, acting aggressively to remove Russian language from the public sphere and ethnic Russians from positions of authority inside the country. Government policies under such a leader might also shift financial resources away from the northern and eastern parts of the country where ethnic Russian inhabitants predominate.

The leadership might undertake policies to reduce Kazakhstan’s ties to Russia, perhaps going so far as to suspend membership in the Eurasian Union. In doing so, the leadership would bank on expanding already close economic ties with China into the political and security spheres. Such a development would worry Russian leaders, who are comfortable with a division of influence with China in Central Asia as long as Russia continues its primacy in the security sphere—they would be concerned about a Kazakhstan government bent on severing political and security ties to Moscow.

Finally, Russian intervention might also be triggered by mass protests leading to a color revolution, similar to Georgia in 2003 or Ukraine in 2004–05 and 2013–14. The population might be outraged by corruption and repression during tough economic times. As in the first scenario, Kazakhstan’s leadership would
need to precipitate the intervention by requesting assistance from either Russia directly or the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Russian leaders would then act in support of this request.

**Likely Modes of Intervention**

The modes of intervention would depend on the type of scenario to which Russian leaders would be responding. They could range from information warfare and subversion to a full-scale invasion and occupation of part of Kazakhstan’s territory. A joint operation with China is also possible if both countries find their interests to be threatened.

Subversion and information warfare are likely to be the initial responses to an anti-Russian government coming to power in Astana. Kazakhstan is big, and Russia does not have a sufficiently large troop presence near its border with Central Asia. A military intervention would thus be seen as a difficult proposition that could result in unacceptably high costs. For this reason, Russian leaders would be far more likely to try to use indirect and covert means to pressure a Kazakh nationalist government pursuing an anti-Russian agenda to reverse course. Such measures could include cyberattacks, a media and information campaign aimed at discrediting the government and its senior leaders, and subversion efforts designed to bring down anti-Russian leaders and replace them with more amenable ones.

Should such efforts fail, Russia could escalate by launching an irregular warfare campaign with assistance from local pro-Russian (especially, but not necessarily, ethnic Russian) paramilitary groups. Such an escalation would essentially be the Kazakhstan version of the 2014 Donbas scenario. Such an operation would risk failure, much as the use of irregular forces in Ukraine failed when matched against Ukrainian government troops. Should pro-Russian irregulars in northern Kazakhstan be facing defeat, Russia could choose to engage its regular forces to prop up the irregulars, as happened, again, in the Donbas in August 2014.

If Russian leaders find that there is no option short of an open intervention, they could launch an invasion of a limited area of northern Kazakhstan. Although a high-risk option, such an attack could, if successful, result in greater support for the Russian government from nationalist groups in Russia, especially if it culminated in the occupation and possible annexation of some part of Kazakhstan with a large Russian population.

**A Friendly Government in Danger**

Russia would respond quite differently to a situation in which the government in Kazakhstan was threatened by internal instability or externally sponsored anti-regime forces. If Astana asked Moscow for assistance in countering either a popular protest movement or an Islamist uprising or incursion, Russian leaders would likely provide that assistance either on their own or through a regional organization such as the CSTO. Such a scenario could involve a resurgent Taliban or possibly a new extremist group that may link itself to the Islamic State or another international radical Islamist umbrella group that might succeed ISIS in the future, much as ISIS has largely replaced al Qaeda as the leading sponsor of international Islamic extremism.

In such a situation, Russia’s minimum goal would be to protect its borders to ensure that insurgents do not infiltrate into Russia itself. A secondary goal would be to protect ethnic Russians living near the Russian border. Russia’s maximum goal would be to defeat the insurgency and restore full state control over the entirety of Kazakhstan’s territory, with a friendly government in place in Astana. If the insurgency appears to be particularly well entrenched and difficult to defeat, Russian leaders may also contemplate an intermediate goal, which would involve containing the insurgency in remote parts of southern Kazakhstan, where it would not pose a significant threat to Russia itself or to the survival of the government in Astana.

As mentioned above, Russia would prefer to work through the CSTO in such a scenario. While other CSTO member states do not have the military assets to cardinaly affect the course of a conflict, the CSTO provides political infrastructure that Moscow can leverage to approve and legitimize an intervention. Since Russian decision-making speed greatly exceeds that of more democratic states and most international organizations, the CSTO’s political mechanisms may be used to provide an international stamp of approval for Moscow’s decision to intervene while others are still formulating their policies on the matter.
Available Force: Structure and Composition

Overall, Russia’s forces for a Central Asia operation include six brigades, one air assault brigade, three artillery brigades, and three surface-to-air missile brigades. Russia has conducted a number of exercises in recent years demonstrating that its ground forces are prepared to enter Central Asia and engage in combat there. The Russian air force, which is vastly superior to that deployed by any of the Central Asian states, includes three multi-role strike fighter squadrons, two fighter-bomber squadrons, two attack helicopter squadrons, and six helicopter transport squadrons of various types. The Caspian Flotilla could also provide support, primarily with Kalibr cruise missiles launched from its missile ships, a capability it demonstrated during Russia’s military operation in Syria.²

Russia is also likely to leverage its military’s mobility, deploying airborne forces to the area where an insurgency would be active, likely with support from Russian ground forces based in Tajikistan and a Su-25 air wing from the Kant Air Base in Kyrgyzstan. The operation would be run by the Central Military District headquarters in Yekaterinburg. Depending on the insurgency’s location, troops from the Second Army in Samara or the 41st Army in Novosibirsk could be involved in ensuring security on Russia’s border with Kazakhstan or providing additional troops should the airborne rapid response force prove insufficient.

A final possibility if the Kazakhstani government lost control over its territory is a joint response by Russia and China. China would be unlikely to intervene in a conflict in Kazakhstan unless it felt that the situation presented a critical threat to its energy supplies or that Chinese nationals working in Kazakhstan were in imminent danger. In those situations, Chinese and Russian forces could work together to protect Kazakhstan’s energy infrastructure (both fields and pipelines), stabilize the situation, and potentially provide support for the government of Kazakhstan to retake control of its territory.

After using airborne and other regular troops to defeat the insurgency, Russia would seek to avoid any long-term presence of its regular forces on the ground in Kazakhstan. Instead, it would try to transfer authority over any territory under its control to regular Kazakhstani forces. If such forces are in disarray or otherwise insufficient to control the situation, a CSTO peacekeeping force would likely be assembled, perhaps supplemented with Russian peacekeeping forces.

Russian planners will also want to think through the potential consequences of failure, in case the operation encounters unexpected difficulties. Such consequences would include excessively high casualties among Russian troops, which could lead to domestic discontent. The inability to suppress a radical Islamist insurgency could also encourage similar forces to take action in Russia, increasing terrorist activity and perhaps relaunching the Islamist insurgency in the Caucasus or the Middle Volga (Tatarstan and Bashkortostan) area. These factors may encourage Russian planners to declare victory and preemptively withdraw their forces, as long as Russia’s minimal goals were achieved.

Conclusion

Although Russian military forces are far superior to those of Kazakhstan, an intervention there would be a complicated endeavor for Russia. The country’s size and relative remoteness from main Russian troop concentrations would complicate any efforts by the Russian government to impose its will on Kazakhstan. The possibility of a Donbas scenario, in which Russia seeks to annex Kazakhstani territory for domestic political reasons, is technically possible but unlikely because of the potential for it to generate wider instability throughout Central Asia.

As a result, Russia would be unlikely to undertake an open military intervention in Kazakhstan except as a last resort or if Astana invited it to provide assistance. Russian leaders would also be concerned that any extended conflict in the region, especially one with high casualty rates, would be highly unpopular domestically, and they would therefore seek to ensure that any military effort would be of finite duration. Russia would seek to increase the legitimacy of its actions by engaging the international community, especially regional organizations such as the CSTO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

A non-kinetic intervention would be somewhat more likely, especially if Russian leaders felt that Kazakhstan was become unstable or moving to sever its security relationship with Russia. Such an intervention would use soft power levers, primarily through
the media and other information channels. The goal would be to discredit and subvert anti-Russian leaders so as to weaken or replace them with leaders willing to maintain and develop ties with Russia.

**About the Author**

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**Notes**

1. There are many pro-Russian Kazakhs in Kazakhstan. For many middle-aged urban Kazakhs, Russian is the native language, so they are well tied into the Russian cultural sphere.

2. This force breakdown is based on Gudrun Persson, ed., *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective—2016* (FOI, 2016), 71-72, 76.