

The Burgeoning Civil War In Kazakhstan

To many, Kazakhstan is a relatively unknown, mysterious country in central Asia. To most Americans, it is most known for being the home country of the fictional character Borat portrayed by Sacha Baron Cohen. However, Kazakhstan is quickly becoming a hotbed of a democratic uprising. For decades Kazakhstan was a member of the former U.S.S.R. Upon the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Nursultan A. Nazarbayev (former head of the Kazakhstan Communist Party) was elected president of Kazakhstan, running unopposed winning 98% of the vote. After the election of 1991, Nazarbayev would go on to rule Kazakhstan with an iron fist dictatorship for over thirty years. Under Nazarbayev's rule, Citizens were arrested without being charged with crimes and denied due process and fair trials. The government shuttered newspapers and media the world press freedom organization ranked Kazakhstan 155 out of 180 in their 2021 index. Religious organizations were also forced to register with the state or face closure. Nazarbayev is also widely known to be corrupt; in 2002, the Kazakh newspaper Respublika ran a story showing that Nazarbayev had embezzled 1 billion American dollars from the state oil company. In response to the report, the offices of Respublika were bombed. Nazarbayev did not give up power until March 20th, 2019, when he resigned due to the pro-democracy protest. With Nazarbayev's departure, many reforms came under his successor Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. However, Nazarbayev's grip remained on Kazakhstan as he remained chairman of the Kazakh security council, a post Tokayev recently forced Nazarbayev to resign from to quell protest. This long history of oppression coupled with rising gas prices has caused mass riots all over the country. At first, the riots were focused on the capital city of Nur-Sultan and Almaty, a prominent Kazakh city. Soon these riots began to verge on acts of civil war. With

the burning of the presidential palace and seizing of the Almaty airport, killing two Kazakh soldiers in the siege, use of the airport would be crucial in landing foreign military reinforcements in-country. Then Hastily formed Kazakh militias began to attack Kazakh national guard convoys beating and disarming soldiers. There are also reports of small arms fire exchanges between protestors and Kazakh military forces, with the government claiming 18 soldiers dead and 750 wounded. In addition to these deaths, there have been two confirmed beheadings of Kazakh security staff. In an admission that the crisis is beyond his control, President Tokayev has called a telecommunications blackout on the entire nation and requested military support from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CTSO), composed of Russia and other ex-soviet authoritarian states like Belarus. In the first of its kind mission for CTSO 3,770 soldiers, have been deployed on the Russian-led "peacekeeping" mission. Russia makes up most of the contribution with 3,000 soldiers, including its elite 45th airborne Spetsnaz special forces brigade. The Kremlin has also stated that they will send reinforcements if need be and have put GRU Spetsnaz forces (run by the KGB independent of the Russian military) on high alert. The Russian commitment in Kazakhstan could also prove quite taxing on their military. With Russian troops already being deployed in Ukraine and Syria, the addition of a Kazakhstan deployment could stretch the military too thin. However, Russia has a unique interest in squashing the Kazakh protest. In Putin's eyes, the protest is about much more than gas prices. They are a rebuke of Nazarbayev's dictatorship and corruption; the crisis in Kazakhstan could appear as a herringbone of what is to come in Moscow. Or perhaps Putin sees the open invitation of Russian troops as an opportunity to expand influence into central Asia and rebuild his one great Soviet Union. After all, it's only been seven years since Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine under the guise of security and peacekeeping.