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KAZAKHSTAN-THAILAND RELATIONS: PAST TIES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

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Abstract. The article examines relations between Kazakhstan and Thailand. It looks at their political, economic and socio-cultural relations as well as their cooperation within multilateral fora so far. It then examines the prospects for future cooperation and puts forward the view that relations are likely to be enhanced due to increasing interest in each other. Kazakhstan's central role in China's Belt and Road Initiative has attracted Thailand's greater attention, while Kazakhstan seeks to enhance relations with Thailand, as well as other ASEAN countries, to bring greater balance in its relations and provide some counterweight to increasing Chinese economic influence.

Keywords: Kazakhstan's foreign policy, Thailand, ASEAN, Belt and Road Initiative, Eurasian Economic Union

Андатпа. Мақалада Қазақстан мен Таиланд арасындағы қатынастар қарастырылған. Басты назар саяси, экономикалық және әлеуметтік-мәдени байланыстарына, сондай-ақ көпжақты форумдар аясындағы ынтымақтастыққа аударылады. Сонымен қатар, болашақтағы ынтымақтастықтың келешегін қарастырады және бір-біріне деген қызығушылықтың артуына байланысты қатынастарды жақсартуға болатындығы туралы пікір ұсынады. Қытайдың «Белдеу және Жол» бастамасында Қазақстанның басты рөлі Таиландтың назарын аударды, ал Қазақстан АСЕАН-ның басқа елдерімен қатар, Таиландпен де қарым-қатынасты жақсартуға, тепетендікті сақтауға және өсіп келе жатқан Қытайдың экономикалық ықпалын жеңілдетуге тырысады.

Түйінді сөздер: Қазақстанның сыртқы саясаты, Таиланд, АСЕАН, «Белдеу және Жол» бастамасы, Еуразиялық Экономикалық Одақ.

Аннотация. В статье исследуется отношения между Казахстаном и Таиландом. Рассматриваются политические, экономические и социально-культурные отношения, а также сотрудничества в рамках многосторонних форумов. Также, анализируются перспективы будущего сотрудничества и выдвигается мнение о том, что отношения могут быть улучшены из-за растущего интереса друг к другу. Главная роль Казахстана в Китайской инициативе «Пояс и Путь» привлекла больше внимания Таиланда, в то время как Казахстан стремится улучшить отношения с Таиландом, а также с другими странами АСЕАН, чтобы внести большой баланс в своих отношениях и обеспечить противовес растущему экономическому влиянию Китая.

Ключевые слова: внешняя политика Казахстана, Таиланд, АСЕАН, инициатива «Пояс и Путь», Евразийский Экономический Союз.

Introduction

December 1991, Kazakhstan's foreign policy has often been described as a multi-vector foreign policy, in which Kazakhstan seeks to establish and maintain good relations with all the major countries as well as regional bodies, including the Association of

Since Kazakhstan's independence in

Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Within the ASEAN members, five countries have been singled out in Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy Concept for 2014-2020, which states that "Kazakhstan will continue pursuing development of long-term, mutually beneficial economic and trade relations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the

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Republic of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Republic of Singapore, and the Kingdom of Thailand" [1]. This article will focus on Kazakhstan's relations with Thailand, which is ASEAN's second largest economy (GDP) of USD 505 billion in 2018), after Indonesia, and has ASEAN's fourth largest population (nearly 68 million in 2018) [2]. The article will look at political, economic and socio-cultural ties between the two counties as well as their cooperation within multilateral fora so far. It will then examine the prospects for future cooperation.

Political Ties

Political ties have been relatively close with a steady exchange of high-level visits and meetings. Diplomatic relations were established on 6 July 1992. The then Kazakhstan, President of Nursultan Nazarbayev, paid an official visit to Thailand during 20-23 July 1993, his first and only visit, during which an agreement to establish an Intergovernmental Joint Commission was signed. Relations became intensified during Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's government (2001-2006) due to increased attention given to relations with Russia and other important post-Soviet countries such as Kazakhstan. In October 2004, the then Thai Foreign Minister, Surakiart Sathirathai, paid a first official visit to Kazakhstan as well as took part in the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) foreign ministerial meeting during which Thailand became a member. In May 2005, he further paid a working visit to Kazakhstan and met with the Kazakhstani Foreign Minister Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Earlier that month, Tokayev had also visited Thailand to attend an ESCAP meeting. In June 2006, the then Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra visited Kazakhstan to attend the CICA Summit in Almaty. Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn also paid a royal visit to Kazakhstan in April 2005 and was awarded the Order "Dostyk" ("Friendship") Second Degree by President Nazarbayev [3; 4]. On the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in September 2009, the then Thai Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya met with the then Kazakhstani Foreign Minister Kanat Saudabayev. During the meeting the Thai Foreign Minister informed his Kazakhstani counterpart that Thailand was particularly interested in Kazakhstan's energy resources

and in cooperation in tourism, science, and sports to enhance people-to-people relations [5]. Two Thai deputy prime ministers also visited Kazakhstan for the Astana EXPO in 2017. More recently, the Thai Foreign Minister, Don Pramudwinai, met with the Kazakhstani Foreign Minister, Mukhtar Tileuberdi, on the sidelines of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Madrid on 16 December 2019, during which the possibility of Kazakhstani President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's visit to Thailand in late 2020 was discussed. The two sides also discussed the possibility of Thailand hosting the 4th Intergovernmental Joint Commission. The Commission is the key platform for dialogue on all aspects of bilateral relations. It is co-chaired by the Minister of Labour on Kazakhstani side and by the Deputy Foreign Minister on the Thai side. The latest meeting was held in Kazakhstan on 21 June 2017 and was attended by the Thai Deputy Foreign Minister, Virasakdi Futrakul. Ideally it should be held every year, if possible, but political and economic developments in countries have made this difficult and so far only three meetings have been held since its inception in 1993.

Economic Linkages

Kazakhstan's significance for Thailand in Central Asia is due to the fact that it has a more developed economy and infrastructure than any other Central Asian country. Kazakhstan's importance is also due to its key central location in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as well as its "Nurly Zhol" ("Bright Path") transport infrastructure development programme which links with the BRI, thereby making Kazakhstan central to the land connection between Asia and Europe. Thailand also sees Kazakhstan as its most promising trade partner in Central Asia and is currently Thailand's largest trading partner in the region. Bilateral trade figures are rising from US \$47 million in 2015 to nearly US \$93 million in 2018 [6]. However, logistical problems remain the biggest obstacle to higher trade turnover between the two countries. Kazakhstan has encouraged Thai exporters and logistics businesses to use the Kazakh-Chinese terminal in the Chinese port of Lianyungang which is connected by railway to the "Khorgos – Eastern Gateway" Special Economic Zone at the Kazakhstan-China

border for the transport of Thai goods to Kazakhstan and onwards to Europe [7]. Since March 2019. Viet Nam had started to successfully utilise this Lianyungang-Khorgos route for transporting goods to Europe and enhancing its trade with Kazakhstan. Seeing this success, the Thai Embassy in Kazakhstan launched a programme in August 2019 to explore the possibility of Thai exporters using the same route in order to overcome the logistics and transport obstacles. Using this route that reaches Germany by railway in 15 days is also a much shorter alternative than shipping Thai goods to Europe by sea. Nonetheless, those Thai exporters who have tried to use this route have often experienced problems with Chinese paperwork irregularities at the border with Kazakhstan that have caused delays in their shipment, affecting Thai exports which are often perishable goods like fruit and vegetables [8]. Thailand is also lagging behind Viet Nam, and more recently Singapore, in concluding a Free Trade Agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), in which Kazakhstan is a member. Thailand is still in the early stage of negotiations with the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC), the EAEU's regulatory body. However, Thailand has signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with the EEC, on 19 November 2018, as a first step to enhance interaction between Thailand and the EAEU member states. However. Thailand's lack of a Free Trade Agreement with the EAEU means that at present Thai goods in Kazakhstan are much more expensive than Viet Nam's, which already has such an agreement, thereby making Thai exports much less competitive. As Russ Jalichandra, the Ambassador of Thailand to Kazakhstan, noted, "... the slower we are in negotiating, the more losses we will incur" [8].

In terms of investment, Thailand's major agribusiness conglomerate Charoen Pokphand has invested US\$ 700,000 in Almaty by opening a subsidiary company that produces pet food which has been quite successful. Thailand's major energy company, PTT, has also expressed interest Kazakhstan's energy sector. While Kazakhstan's oil is too sulphurous for the company's refineries to treat thereby making investment in the upstream sector approximately three times more expensive,

PTT is considering investing in the downstream sector instead. Also, in June 2019, PTT acquired Partex Holding B.V., a Portuguese energy company which owned a 20 per cent stake in the Dunga oil field project in Kazakhstan's Mangistau region. This means that PTT is now part of the Dunga project consortium led by France's Total company, which owns 60 per cent, and Oman Oil company, which owns 20 per cent September [9]. Moreover, in Thailand's Board of Investment and Fiscal Policy Research Institute sent a delegation to investment opportunities explore Kazakhstan, especially in the agricultural, food processing, steel and plastics sectors. Tourism and the medical sector are other potential areas for cooperation in which Thailand has much expertise Kazakhstan is trying to develop [10]. In October 2019, Thailand's National Agency Innovation also signed Memorandum of Understanding Kazakhstan's Baiterek National Managing Holding and QazTech Ventures cooperation in startup businesses, ventures and investment in agritech, fintech, and traveltech, as well as development of corporate innovation and venture funds [11]. Kazakhstan has also made some investments in Thailand, especially in the tourism industry. Furthermore, in June 2018, Kazakhstan's KazStroyService won a tender to build gas pipelines in phase two of Thailand's Fifth Transmission Pipeline Project which is 200 kilometres long and expected to finish in 2021 [12].

Socio-Cultural Relations

People-to-people exchanges has been a particularly promising area of cooperation. Thailand is a popular destination for Kazakhstani tourists with more than 50,000 visiting per year since 2017, the second largest after Russia amongst the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Most of these Kazakhstani tourists take back home their appreciation for Thai culture, food, massage and boxing. Muay Thai is especially popular in Kazakhstan, in which boxing is a major sport. Indeed, Karim Massimov, Kazakhstan's former prime minister and current Chair of the National Security Committee (KNB), is the Vice President of the International Federation of Muaythai Associations (IFMA) and President of the Federation of Amateur Muaythai of

Asia (FAMA) and of Kazakhstan Muaythai Federation. While the number of Thai tourists visiting Kazakhstan is much less and only in the hundreds, this is set to increase due to Kazakhstan's introduction in September 2019 of a visa-free entry regime for Thai citizens, as well as for citizens of some other Southeast Asian countries - Viet Nam, the Philippines, and Indonesia – in addition to Singapore and Malaysia which already enjoy visa-free travel to Kazakhstan [13]. However, recent imposition of quarantine measures for 14 days on people travelling from Thailand into Kazakhstan in response to the COVID-19 virus outbreak would temporarily hamper tourism both ways [14]. In terms of cultural cooperation, a number of cultural events was held in 2019 in both Kazakhstan and Thailand to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the establishment of sister cities between Bangkok and Nur-Sultan. For instance, during the Astana Day celebrations in July, the Thai Embassy in Kazakhstan organised two days of Thai cultural performances in Nur-Sultan, during which more than one thousand Kazakhs came to enjoy.

Cooperation within Multilateral Fora

Thailand and Kazakhstan generally good cooperation and support each other on global issues multilateral fora such as the UN and CICA. The two countries share similar positions on such issues as nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament and the peaceful settlement of disputes based on international law and the UN Charter. According to then Foreign Minister Tokayev, Kazakhstan had also supported Thailand's candidature for the post of United Nations Secretary-General -Thai Foreign Minister and later Deputy Prime Minister Surakiart Sathirathai - on the understanding that he would be able to enlist the support of ASEAN as well, which he did. However, the military coup in Thailand in September 2006 put an end to his ambition and South Korea's Ban Ki-moon finally won the race in October that year [15]. Thailand has also consistently supported the work of CICA, which was President Nazarbayev's initiative, and was the first ASEAN country to join in 2004. Viet Nam and Cambodia became members later in 2010 and 2011 respectively. Thailand also supported Kazakhstan's intention to participate in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) which

Kazakhstan had expressed several times since 1995. Kazakhstan has long viewed ASEAN as an important player in the Asia-Pacific region due to its key role in regionalism and the formation of regional institutions. As then Kazakhstani Foreign Minister Erlan Idrissov noted in a meeting with ASEAN ambassadors in 2014, ASEAN had become "a centre of Asian integration" and "a basic structure for multilateral regional cooperation and it plays an important role in cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region" [16]. However, Kazakhstan's attempts to join the ARF and to become an ASEAN dialogue partner has so far been unsuccessful due to the moratorium in place on new members. Nonetheless. Thailand had been one of the positive more ASEAN members Kazakhstan's possible participation in the ARF. As the then Thai Foreign Minister, Kasit Piromya, stated in response to the then Kazakhstani Foreign Minister Kanat Saudabayev's request for Thailand's support, as ASEAN Chair, for Kazakhstan's ARF membership, "although there was currently a moratorium on new ARF membership, Thailand was open Kazakhstan's possible future membership" [5]. Nonetheless, according to the ASEAN Secretariat, the issue of Kazakhstan's application to the ARF has not yet been discussed in detail in the ARF [17]. Kazakhstan

had also proposed the formation of a Eurasian Security Zone based on the transformation of CICA into a full-fledged "Organization for Security and Cooperation in Asia". The first step towards this would be the convening of a Joint Consultative Meeting between the secretariats or chairs of Organisation for CICA. Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and ASEAN [18]. In March 2019, Kazakhstan approached the Thai side, as Thailand then held the ASEAN Chairmanship, to explore this opportunity. However, while the OSCE was generally receptive to the proposal, ASEAN's response was muted. Moreover, although the two countries have generally been supportive and cooperative with each other in the multilateral arena, they did compete with each other for election to become a nonpermanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for the term 2017-Asia-Pacific 2018 from the group. Nonetheless, both sides conducted their

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campaign in an amicable manner and Kazakhstan won after two rounds of voting on 28 June 2016, becoming the first Central Asian country to hold a UNSC seat. Thailand expressed its full congratulations to Kazakhstan [19].

Prospects for Kazakhstan-Thailand Relations

As President Tokavev has stated. Kazakhstan will continue the foreign policy course of the previous President -Nazarbayev [20]. This includes the multivector foreign policy which Tokayev had helped to develop and implement when he was at the foreign ministry. It is probable that the countries of Southeast Asia would be assigned greater importance under Tokayev due to his experience and expertise in Asia. he had written earlier, due to Kazakhstan's central position in Eurasia, "it would be unnatural and even harmful to avoid cooperation with the countries of South and Southeast Asia..." [15]. Tokayev also had direct experience working in Southeast Asia, although he was trained as a China expert. He started his training at the Soviet Foreign Ministry in the Southeast Asia department and his first work abroad was at the Soviet Embassy in Singapore from 1975 to 1979 [21]. Furthermore, as a former foreign minister, Tokayev is familiar with ASEAN and is likely to maintain good relations with it. He is also familiar with Thailand, which he has visited twice in 1997 and 2005 as foreign minister. While Thailand might not be the most important ASEAN country for Kazakhstan, it is likely that Tokayev would try to strengthen relations with Thailand, as part of a broader engagement with ASEAN as a whole, to bring greater balance in Kazakhstan's

relations and provide some counterweight to increasing Chinese economic influence in Kazakhstan. Indeed, according to some Kazakhstani foreign policy experts, ASEAN countries have a more positive image than China in Kazakhstan [22]. Kazakhstan is also interested in learning from Thailand's expertise as a leader in the tourism and service-based industry. areas Kazakhstan is trying to promote. Tokayev's interest in developing closer relations with Southeast Asia and Thailand is evident in his proposed visit to Thailand in late 2020, which, if it takes place, would be the second time a President of Kazakhstan has visited Thailand.

For Thailand, as well as some other ASEAN countries, Kazakhstan's importance as the central part in China's BRI is likely to grow. Kazakhstan's major investments in roads, railways and ports to establish transport corridors to the east, west and south would help open up the markets of Southeast Asia for Kazakhstan and vice versa. As President Tokayev noted, the recently launched transcontinental Vietnam-China-Kazakhstan-Europe railway offers exporters access to ASEAN markets. This could also provide an alternative to sea transportation, allowing goods Southeast Asia to be delivered to Europe through EAEU member states, such as Kazakhstan, in the shortest time [23]. All of this would lead to further economic the EAEU and engagement between ASEAN, which would help strengthen economic relations as well as enhance overall engagement between their member states, including between Kazakhstan and Thailand, thereby bringing a new impetus to their relationship.

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ҚАЗАҚСТАН-ТАЙЛАНД ҚАТЫНАСТАРЫ: БҰРЫНҒЫ ҚАТЫНАСТАР ЖӘНЕ БОЛАШАҚ ПЕРСПЕКТИВАЛАРЫ

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КАЗАХСТАНСКО-ТАИЛАНДСКИЕ ОТНОШЕНИЯ: ПРОШЛЫЕ ОТНОШЕНИЯ И БУДУЩИЕ ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ

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