

Geopolitical identity and nation-building: the case study of the Republic of Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT

Studying the connections between geopolitics and domestic political attributes of the state such as national identity poses a particular range of challenges to the researcher. The present article explores the potential connections and parallels between the Kazakhstan nation-building project and the nation-state's geopolitical identity vis-à-vis the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China. In the course of this analysis, the researcher has established the lack of the direct connection between nation-building and geopolitical positioning in the case of Kazakhstan. However, it has been noted that the former may influence the latter as far as perceiving threats and opportunities associated with the respective geopolitical centers for the integrity of Kazakhstani identity may be concerned.

KEYWORDS: Geopolitical identity, Nation-building, Eurasia, Post-Soviet space, Kazakhstan

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1.Introduction. The development of the national identity of post-Soviet states has been a complex and protracted process, being characterized by the conflict between the imperative of providing for a clear-cut ethno-national identity for the state in question and the importance of responding to the fact of the common legacy of the nations and ethnic groups concerned. In this context, the case of the Republic of Kazakhstan, one of the largest Eurasian states that emerged in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union (and which was one of the last former Soviet republics to formally declare its independence [1]) may be illustrative of the complexity of the aforementioned process of nation-building. At the same time, the geopolitical environment of the Republic of Kazakhstan is marked by an interpellation of geopolitical influences, with the geopolitical centers of the Russian Federation (hereinafter referred to as Russia) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) being in close proximity to the Kazakhstani state's borders, while the impact of Kazakhstan's increasing involvement in the global capitalist division of labor contribute to the growing geopolitical and geo-economic ties between Kazakhstan and the collective West, respectively.

With this in mind, it will be fruitful to consider to what extent the factor of the complicated geopolitical and geo-economic environment might have reflected in the Kazakhstan nation-building process, so that paying attention to the vicissitudes of the national identity project for the Republic of Kazakhstan may be expected to enable the researchers to posit the question of a possible relationship between a state's geopolitical / geo-economic environment on the one hand and the specifics of its nation-building policy on the other. Accordingly, the present article attempts to shed light on this research problem by providing for an in-depth and focused analysis of the Kazakhstani narratives of nation-building vis-à-vis those of international political and economic partnership or contestation with the aforementioned geopolitical / geo-economic centers throughout the contemporary history of the Republic of Kazakhstan (from 1991 on). In such manner, the major research question that needs to be addressed here may be formulated as follows: "To what extent has the geopolitical and geo-economic environment of Kazakhstan conditioned the state's nation-building policy, or has the latter been developing in accordance with the internal logic of its own?" Thus providing the answer to that question will be the underlying concern of this article's argument to unfold below.

Geopolitics, geoeconomics and nation-building: the importance of geopolitical identity

Conceptualizing the relationship between nation-building and geopolitical / geo-economic environment requires one to give due consideration to the importance of a given nation-state's geopolitical identity as a potential linkage between the two aforementioned concepts. In accordance with a broader methodology of social constructivism in social and political research [2,3], a political identity constitutes an outcome of producing ideas and perceptions about one's interests and priorities, which would "strongly imply a particular set of interests or preferences with respect to choices of action in particular domains, and with respect to particular actors", so that a given political actor's identity would pre-define its "consequent actions" [4,p.175]. Thus the notion of geopolitical identity refers to a nation-state's construction of its perceived interests and priorities within a specific geopolitical space it inhabits,

with the resulting combination of ideas and interests having a direct impact on the state's actions with respect to the other geopolitical actors [5,6]. It should be noted, however, that the social constructivist interpretation of geopolitical identity does not imply that "international institutions" (such as territorial systems of international political and economic integration) "can transform state identities and interests" [7,p.394]. Rather, following P. J. Katzenstein [8], one may observe that internal political attributes, such as national identity of a state, would give rise to a specific construction of statehood, which will in turn underlie the dominant perception of that state's distinctiveness from its neighbors. In so doing, the ideology of national 'purpose' emerging from such considerations will condition the state's external interests and then influence the latter's positions with respect to its international policy interactions. In that regard, the interpretation of the role of identity in international politics provided by Katzenstein may be extrapolated to the specific case of geopolitical identity, which would once again emphasize the latter's endogenous nature.

More specifically, geopolitical identity should be further understood as a complicated outcome of a set of constantly evolving identity discourses lying behind a state's security imaginary, i.e., a set of foreign policy positions taken by the state's elite and their affiliated expert class as constituting a legitimate system of references for debates and decisions taking place within the state's geopolitical 'universe' [5]. The corresponding impact of the shifts and transformations within the security imaginary upon a state's geopolitical identity could then be viewed as having an impact upon its ideology of statehood, including national identity in particular. Thus defining the empirical extent to which the two constructs in question may be mutually constitutive can be seen as an essential part of the effective activities of the researchers dealing with the matters of nation-building and geopolitics in the context of complex and recent transformations of the prevailing ideologies of statehood and political identities – a situation of which the post-Soviet space, including the Republic of Kazakhstan, would furnish some of its most vivid examples.

Finally, one should dwell upon the notion of geographical proximity and its relevance to the formation of a state's geopolitical and especially geo-economic interests regarding cooperation or conflict with specific centers of geopolitical influence. As noted by Shinasak Suwan-acharya [9], the opportunities provided by a country's economic geographic location may be subject to change in the context of socio-historical, geopolitical, and socio-economic factors of cross-border development. Similarly, the development of effective geopolitical ties between a given state and the geopolitical centers exerting their influence upon the latter is likely to be conditioned by changes in the state's domestic attributes, such as the ones effected by the process of nation-building. It may be assumed that the extent to which the state's politically active population may identify with the currently dominant project of nation-building and national identity will have both direct and indirect impact upon that population's varying perceptions of the nature of the state's relations with one or another center of geopolitical and geo-economic influence – as demonstrated by the case of Ukraine after 2013-2014 [10]. Hence the degree to which an internally diverse state, such as the Republic of Kazakhstan, may hope to maintain a coherence and congruence of its international and domestic policy may be dependent upon the degree to which its

nation-building policy may or may not be aligned with the imperatives arising out of its geopolitical surroundings.

2.Methodology: Political narrative analysis.With this in mind, clarifying the relationship between the national and the geopolitical identity of the Republic of Kazakhstan will necessitate engaging with the narratives of both as expounded and reflected in the official statements and publications of the Kazakhstani state, its paramount leader(s), and their duly authorized spokespersons. In so doing, it is expected that the respective narratives of nation-building and geopolitical identity may be effectively isolated, and their effective similarities and divergences placed in their comprehensive context. As observed by Shaul Shenhav [11], narrative analysis in political science presents an array of diverse approaches that can hardly be generalized under some common denominator. Rather, the main common feature of all the forms of political narrative analysis lies in their focus on discursive storytelling on the part of the respective political actors, whether individual, organizational, or state-level ones. As the level of methodological analysis of the present article is that of the nation-state (the Republic of Kazakhstan), the form of political narrative analysis that will be the most suitable to its purposes should concern the analysis of the narratives of the nation-state as a “bounded community constituted by a biographical narrative which gives meaning to its collective spatio-temporal situatedness [12,p.262]. Thus it is Felix Berenskoetter’s conceptualization of the nation-state as a biographical narrative that may be specifically singled out here. According to the author, the state’s capacity to highlight specific experiences of the national past is an essential aspect of its power to provide the ‘national’ Self with the knowledge about its place in the world and the direction of its ‘journey’ through the latter. Hence understanding the Kazakhstani state’s construction of its internal national identity in such a way will be juxtaposed against the similar process of constructing its external geopolitical identity, so that the nature of the specific relationship between the two may be clarified in accordance with the methodology stated above.

3.Narratives of nation-building and geopolitical identity of the Republic of Kazakhstan compared.Arguably, the key features of the nation-building policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan since 1991 have included (1) the emphasis on building an explicitly multi-ethnic civic nation; (2) the recognition of the ‘titular’ character of the Kazakh ethne as the basis for the development of the contemporary Kazakhstani state; and (3) the recognition of equality of languages and national traditions of non-Kazakh ethnic groups in the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan under the principle of inter-ethnic harmony [13]. The institution of the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan, created under the respective Law of October 2008, may be seen as reflective of that three-pronged narrative of the Kazakhstan nation-building. According to the Law on the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan, “the Assembly contributes to the realization of the government’s policies regarding nationalities ... [and] to guaranteeing interethnic harmony in Kazakhstan within the process of forming a Kazakhstan state identity and nation ... in relation to the consolidating role of the Kazakh people” [13,p.270].

Hence one may see that “a Kazakhstan state identity and nation” are viewed as arisen out of the process of the growth of “interethnic harmony” within Kazakhstani society, with the “Kazakh people”

being acknowledged as the central pillar of that harmonious relationship. In so doing, the narrative of the national identity of the Kazakhstani has been built around the coalescence of the conventional nationalist narrative of the nation-state as the core homeland for the respective 'titular' ethnic group with that of the civic nationhood and the respective form of statehood arising to provide for the effective convergence of different ethnic groups (i.e., Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, etc.) within the state's territory on the basis of shared loyalty to their common state [14, 15]. In the words of the first President of the Republic of Kazakhstan and its current National Leader [Yelbasy] Nursultan Nazarbayev, the three key principles that should govern the process of nation-building of Kazakhstan under the 2009 Doctrine of National Unity would be "one country, one destiny", "various origins, equal opportunities", and "development of national spirit" [16]. Hence the biographical narrative of the Republic of Kazakhstan would see the convergence, but also an implicit conflict, of two major interpretations, the ethnic nationalist and the civic nationalist one. As observed by Özgüç Kesici [17], the main dilemma existing in that regard concerns the question of the extent to which the narrative of the ethnic nation of the Kazakhs could be reconciled with that of the civic nation of the Kazakhstani. This is especially problematic given that non-Kazakh ethnic groups are implicitly assumed to have arrived in the already Kazakh territory during the rule of the Russian Empire, and then of the Soviet Union, from the mid-18th century on – a factor that would raise the question of the role of the post-colonial narrative in the structure of the Kazakhstani national identity [13]. Thus it can be surmised that the development of the shared biography of the Kazakhstani nation is yet to be completed.

The recent article penned by the incumbent President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev [18] would arguably exemplify the elite's awareness of challenges to the project of the Kazakhstani nation-building. The immediate context that article's appearance has been popularly identified as a reaction to the December 2020 remarks on the part of the Russian State Duma's deputy Vyacheslav Nikonov concerning the alleged nature of the bulk of the present-day Kazakhstani territory as a 'gift' from Russia and then the Soviet Union [18]. Hence such kind of remarks by the representative of the legislative authority of Russia could not but elicit a highly negative reaction on the part of the Kazakhstani representatives, with the article by Tokayev being an effective reflection on historiological and discursive issues raised by that incident. In effect, Tokayev would underscore the fact of the historical continuity of the Kazakh people with the previous nomadic peoples and communities that used to inhabit the territory of the contemporary Kazakhstan, as well as to refer to the aspects of the history of Kazakhstan that had not been effectively covered in the Soviet period – most notably, to the 1932-1933 famine in Kazakhstan, the memory of which was effectively silenced until 1991 [19]. The changes in the biographical narrative of the Kazakhstani national identity that may have been brought about by Tokayev's reinterpretation of the key aspects of the historical identity of the Kazakhstani state may turn out to be of great significance for the future development of the nation-building process in the country. In particular, they may signal a greater turn toward the explicitly ethnic interpretation of the Kazakhstani historical legacy, which may further expose the internal contradictions of the coexistence of the ethnic Kazakh and the civic Kazakhstani narratives as mentioned above.

On the other hand, the narratives of geopolitical and geo-economic co-existence of the Republic of Kazakhstan with the geopolitical centers influencing the state's external situation appear to be largely focused on mutually advantageous cooperation, with the factor of historical and possible future territorial claims being systematically excluded and/or marginalized. In respect of the Russo-Kazakhstani relations, one may follow Luca Anceschi [20] in recognizing the importance of the factor of the 'neo-Eurasianist' ideology as developed and propounded by Nursultan Nazarbayev for understanding the complexity of the bilateral relationship between Russia and Kazakhstan. In effect, Nazarbayev's perception of the 'Eurasian' geopolitical identity of Kazakhstan would imply that the latter would shy away from challenging Russia for the leading role in the respective geopolitical space, but would rather follow a comprehensive 'anti-imperialist' geopolitical agenda as reflected in an astute and flexible use of the terms of the integration agreements in which Kazakhstan would partake to the purpose of maintaining Kazakhstan's independence while gaining benefits of such political and economic affiliations with Russia.

From the 1994 Moscow speech of Nazarbayev, which would usher in the commencement of Kazakhstan's Eurasian integration within the contours of the eponymous Eurasian Union [20,p.286] to Nazarbayev's reinstatement of the principles of 'free will' and 'equality of rights' in the second Moscow speech of 2014 [20,p.293] – the integrationist and the neo-Eurasianist discourse of the Kazakhstani paramount leader would be far more nuanced than either proposing a full geopolitical and geo-economic alignment with Russia or seeking strategic confrontation with the latter. In that sense, the narrative of the post-Soviet geopolitical identity of Kazakhstan would largely mirror the development of the internal national identity in the country (where the Russian community is second in numbers to the ethnic Kazakhs proper): the focus would be ostensibly placed on 'free will' of the parties concerned and their 'equality of rights', while the tension between the Eurasian integration with the pre-eminent role of Russia and the maintenance of unconditional sovereignty for Kazakhstan would be kept implicit and low-key one by the Kazakhstani diplomacy – even in such cases as the aforementioned 'gift' controversy of December 2020.

As concerns the PRC, the Kazakhstani geostrategic position might be viewed as less ambiguous and potentially more precarious, given the far higher disparity in economic potentials between two parties than the one existing between Kazakhstan and Russia, on the one hand, and the lack of the common legacy of the political and state identity in the past mitigating against express conflicts and disagreements, on the other. Kazakhstan's national history narrative has incorporated the reference frame of the national catastrophe suffered by the Kazakh people in the 18th century in the course of the Mongolic Dzungar / Jungar invasion of 1739-1741 – an invasion ostensibly aided and abetted by the Manchu-ruled Qing empire of China [21, 22]. Hence, from the perspective of the biographical narrative analysis of the Kazakhstani nation as based on the ethnic foundations of the Kazakh people, that fact should have influenced the perception of China as a threat to Kazakhstan – a position largely shared by most of ethnic Kazakh nationalists [22]. However, for its part, the Kazakhstani state appears to have avoided relying on the aforementioned aspects of the Kazakh historical memory narrative, instead focusing on the need to develop a pragmatic geo-economic relationship with the contemporary China [23]. In that context, Kazakhstan's active participation in the project of One Belt One Road (OBOR), which is

marketed internationally as representing the ‘New Silk Road’ joining Europe and Asia for the purposes of greater economic growth and prosperity [23], may be seen as a manifestation of the alternate historical narrative, which would be largely autonomous from the one associated with the current process of the Kazakhstani nation’s building. Nonetheless, the PRC may still be viewed as a source of strategic threat, especially as concerns the alleged claims to Kazakhstani national territory [24], while the tense situation surrounding the fortunes of not only the Uighur but also the Kazakhstani ethnic minorities in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region of the PRC has posed a number of challenges for Kazakhstani officials concerning their response to the situation there [25]. Given that Kazakhstan is home to a relatively sizable Uighur community of its own [18], this may be seen as posing a potential threat to the construction of the civic national identity of Kazakhstan as well, which would make the development of the Sino-Kazakhstani relationship rather compromised from the geopolitical point of view.

4. Discussion. Therefore, the analysis presented in this article has allowed the researcher to posit the fact of an ambiguous relationship between Kazakhstan’s nation-building policy and the state’s geopolitical identity. On the one hand, the development of the nation-building narrative itself appears to have been riven by an internal contradiction due to the co-existence of the ethno-nationalist and the civic nationalist elements of the latter. On the other hand, the relationship of Kazakhstan with the two geographically proximate geopolitical and geo-economic centers nearby, i.e., with Russia and the PRC, has been marked by similar discursive ambiguities, e.g., as concerns Kazakhstan’s emphasis on the importance of the Eurasian integration with Russia being coupled with a rather tangible attempts to safeguard its sovereignty and state identity from alleged Russian infringements, or the fear of China’s hegemonic designs concerning Kazakhstan’s territorial integrity being combined with a rhetorical embrace of the narrative of the ‘New Silk Road’ underlying the geo-economic relationship between Kazakhstan and the PRC.

In both cases, the security imaginary underpinning the Kazakhstani elite’s geopolitical capabilities would be directly related to the perceived threats posed by the neighboring geopolitical centers’ imperial identities as regards the Kazakhstani project of building a Eurasian but distinctively independent civic nation of its own. Hence it may be deduced that in the course of the recent geopolitical history of Kazakhstan, there was no direct relationship between the state’s domestic national identity and its geopolitical one. Rather, the two attributes would interact to the extent that perceived risks to the integrity of Kazakhstan as a project of nation-building would be weighed in, and accounted for, in the context of the ruling elite’s security imaginary.

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