



# The United States in Kazakhstani public opinion: Double-edged cultural influence and the collateral damage of foreign policy

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## Abstract

This article employs surveys by Gallup, the Central Asia Barometer, and the Barometer of Eurasian Integration, as well as focus groups that were commissioned as part of this research, to argue (1) that Kazakhstani perceptions of the United States compare unfavorably to perceptions of China and especially of Russia; (2) that Russian influence is a minor or nonexistent cause of the United States' poor image; (3) that US cultural influence has an ambiguous effect on the country's image in Kazakhstan, due to a "clash of values" between conservative Kazakhstani society and relatively liberal US cultural exports; (4) that the United States' foreign policy, especially its violation of other states' sovereignty, has an unambiguously negative effect on its image among Kazakhstanis; and (5) that the resulting relatively negative image of the United States translates into reluctance to build or maintain ties with it. In conclusion, we highlight areas in which the United States–Kazakhstan cooperation is likely to receive a better reception.

## Keywords

Kazakhstan, public opinion, Russia, United States

## Introduction

The US government and policy community have often seen Central Asia as the arena of a new Great Game to be played against Russia, China, and Iran, a game in which the United States sought supply routes and bases for its war in Afghanistan, and new "Silk Roads"<sup>1</sup> to bind the region westward and southward. Yet, while Central Asia is mostly studied as a battlefield for geopolitical competition (Cooley, 2012), public opinion is rarely considered as one of the arenas in which this competition takes place. Edward Schatz was the first to tackle the topic, in 2002, by examining how Islamists were tapping into the repertoire of anti-Americanism (Schatz, 2002). More recently, Scott Radnitz (2016) noted the preeminence of conspiracy theories about the United States in Kyrgyzstan's fluid political environment. Theodore Gerber and Jan Zavisca (2015) observed, for the whole post-Soviet region, that "the United States has a major public relations problem," as "ordinary people see the U.S. as an arrogant, hegemonic superpower that meddles in the affairs of other countries in the cynical pursuit of

its own interests." With these three exceptions, we are still waiting for an in-depth look at the United States' image in Central Asian public opinion.

Kazakhstan has the region's largest territory, greatest GDP(PPP), highest GDP(PPP) per capita, and second largest population. It has, accordingly, been the target of relatively large diplomatic and financial investments by the United States. In this article, which employs surveys by Gallup, the Central Asia Barometer, and the Barometer of Eurasian Integration, as well as focus groups that were

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commissioned as part of this research, we argue (1) that, despite the aforementioned investments, Kazakhstani perceptions of the United States nevertheless compare unfavorably to perceptions of China and especially Russia; (2) that Russian influence is a minor or nonexistent cause of the United States' poor image; (3) that US cultural influence has an ambiguous effect on the country's image in Kazakhstan, due to a "clash of values" between conservative Kazakhstani society and relatively liberal US cultural exports; (4) that the United States' foreign policy, especially its violation of other states' sovereignty, has an unambiguously negative effect on its image among Kazakhstanis; and (5) that the resulting relatively negative image of the United States translates into reluctance to build or maintain ties with it. In conclusion, we highlight areas in which the United States–Kazakhstan cooperation is likely to receive a better reception.

### **Ebbs and flows of US presence in Kazakhstan**

Washington's long-term objectives, in Central Asia generally and in Kazakhstan in particular, were established at the beginning of the 1990s and have not changed significantly since then: avert the return of Russian domination, prevent the emergence of a new hegemonic power in the region (Iran or China), avoid domestic instability or regional instability resulting from proximity to Afghanistan, promote energy and strategic partnerships that turn the region toward Europe and South Asia, and contribute to political and economic reforms, that is, democratization, good governance, and market economy principles (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Although stable, these long-term objectives have not resulted in comprehensive short- and medium-term engagements (Rumer et al., 2016). Seen from Central Asia, the United States often appears unreliable in its commitment, changing the status of the region, and its rank in foreign policy priorities, depending on the geopolitical obsession of the moment—Russia, Iran, Afghanistan, Islamic State, and so on—thereby subordinating the interests of Central Asian states themselves.

US influence in Kazakhstan reached its zenith in the early 2000s: at that time, for a few years, Washington was seen as a competitor equal to Russia, able to challenge Moscow in the heart of Eurasia. But this peak of influence was brief. Rapidly following the "color revolutions" of 2003–2005 in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, political relations became more tense, featuring regular Kazakhstani denunciations of US interference in its domestic affairs. Security cooperation—seen by both sides as an easy way to develop the relationship without addressing divisive topics—continued to develop for a time, but 2014 became a turning point, featuring an unprecedented fall in US influence, due to the Ukraine crisis and the drawdown in Afghanistan.

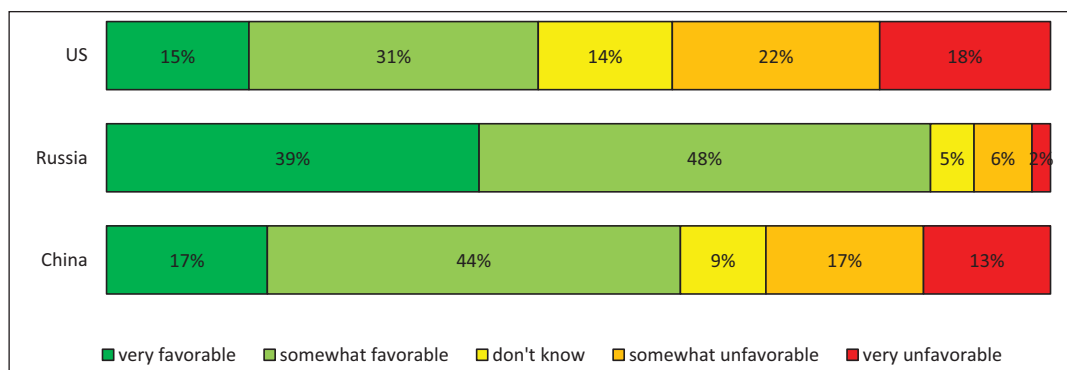
Since then, the United States–Kazakhstan relationship has been unable to renew its honeymoon of the early 2000s. Kazakhstani elites bitterly note that they have been collateral victims of US sanctions against Russia,<sup>2</sup> which damaged Kazakhstani firms because of the country's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union and its close economic ties with Russia in general. The security partnership did not bounce back, and Kazakhstan is now, more than ever, under Russia's strategic umbrella, with difficulties even procuring non-Russian military equipment. Economic links suffered from the fall of world oil prices, which threatened Kazakhstan's relatively expensive production (the International Monetary Fund [2020] estimates Kazakhstan's oil exports as breaking even, on average, at about 80 USD/bbl, but global prices have not reached this point since 2014). On the brighter side, the C5+1 initiative—the five Central Asian countries and the United States—continued to lend diplomatic relations a collegial tone, and President Trump's reception of President Nazarbayev in January 2018 was seen as a victory for Kazakhstan's authorities, always in search of international prestige.

### **Data sources**

Overall, however, the picture is relatively bleak for the United States, as revealed by the various data that we employ in this article.

As mentioned above, we use three sets of surveys. First, the annual Gallup World Polls that were conducted between 2006 and 2020; these were performed in-person in the Kazakh and Russian languages, and had sample sizes of 1,000 and margins of error (at a 95% confidence level) between 3% and 4% (Gallup 2019). Second, the six biannual surveys that were conducted by the Central Asia Barometer (CAB) between July 2017 and December 2019; each survey was conducted in-person, in the Kazakh and Russian languages, with a sample size of 1,500 and a margin of error ranging from 2.7% to 3.9% (CAB, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b, 2020). Third, the Integration Barometer was conducted by the Eurasian Development Bank in 2017; this, too, was performed in person, with a sample size of 1,199 in Kazakhstan (Eurasian Development Bank, 2017).

These three surveys were selected because they are conducted by reliable agencies and cover the topics relevant to this article. CAB asks Kazakhstanis about their general opinions of other countries, and their preferences regarding Kazakhstan's policies toward those countries, and also about why they hold those opinions, both of which are central to the questions addressed by this article. Gallup asks Kazakhstanis about their opinions of other countries' leaders. As a proxy for attitude toward the countries themselves, this is definitely imperfect, but it can be used to corroborate the CAB findings. Gallup's



**Figure 1.** Answer to the question “Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of \_\_\_”

Source: Central Asia Barometer, aggregated data for 2017–2019.

data can also be compared with our analyses in prior articles. In addition, Gallup’s 2015 and 2016 surveys contained a question about preferences regarding immigration to Kazakhstan, which is the best proxy for national conservatism that we have been able to find. Finally, until 2014, Gallup asked a question that forced Kazakhstanis to choose between relations with the US and relations with Russia. The Eurasian Barometer, like CAB and (to a lesser extent in more recent years) Gallup, also asks Kazakhstanis about their opinions of other countries and preferences regarding Kazakhstan’s policy toward them. In sum, the three surveys that we mainly rely upon in this article provide more or less up-to-date measures of Kazakhstani public opinion of the United States and its main rivals in the region, as well as demographic and other data that can be incorporated into regression analyses as control variables. These measures somewhat differ from one another and thus complement one another.

To complement the surveys, we commissioned focus groups, which can provide more complex and nuanced answers to questions, and thus provide a better understanding of Kazakhstani perceptions and narratives regarding the United States. Focus groups were conducted by Serik Beissembayev and his team at the Almaty-based Strategiya Sociological Center, each with 8–10 participants (for a total of 93 participants) in 10 of Kazakhstan’s biggest cities, which are representative of the country’s regional diversity. Focus groups in Almaty and Astana were conducted in Russian and Kazakh; those in Shymkent, Kyzylorda, and Aktau only in Kazakh (cities that are mostly Kazakh-speaking); and those in Karaganda, Petropavlovsk, and Ust-Kamenogorsk only in Russian (cities that are mostly Russian-speaking). The questions were drafted by Marlene Laruelle and Serik Beissembayev in Russian and translated by the latter into Kazakh; the data from all the Kazakh-language focus groups were subsequently translated into Russian. Each focus group hosted an equal number of men and women. Participants were asked about what the United

States represents to them; how they perceive it and American in general, how they assess US politics, economics, culture, and foreign policy; and how they define and evaluate US influence in Kazakhstan. In terms of responses, there were no significant differences between the Kazakh and Russian-speaking groups.

### The relatively low attraction of the United States in Kazakhstan

As depicted in Figure 1, the Central Asia Barometer indicates that Kazakhstanis possessed a highly positive opinion of Russia in the period 2017–2019 and a still largely positive opinion of China, but a deeply ambivalent view of the United States.

### Russia and the United States in public opinion: no mutual exclusivity

The weakness of US influence in Central Asia—including its poor public image there—is often implicitly or explicitly attributed to Russia undermining its American competitor. For instance, as we have noted elsewhere (Laruelle & Royce, 2019), the State Department’s 2016 Congressional Budget Justification expressed the Department’s intent to improve Kazakhstanis’ “access to objective, editorially diverse information sources, cultivating pluralistic civic engagement and resulting in increased openness to U.S. policies and perspectives.” This was driven by a belief that

The vast majority of Kazakhstanis see the world through the filter of Russian media. Improved access to a wider range of objective information sources, resulting from well-trained traditional media, as well as social media and other direct communication with the Mission, will allow Kazakhstan to become less suspicious of Western motives. (U.S. Department of State, 2016, p. 286)

However, this presumption is not supported by the data of Gallup or the CAB. As we have argued elsewhere, 2008–2017 Gallup polling reveals a *positive* correlation between opinions of the US and Russian leaderships, one that is both substantively and statistically significant (Laruelle & Royce, 2019, pp. 201–202). A linear regression of Kazakhstan's approval of the United States' leaders (binary, 0 or 1) over their approval of Russia's leaders (binary, 0 or 1) in 2018 and 2019 confirms this positive correlation (see Supplemental Appendix A).

It becomes small and statistically non-significant when control variables, including opinion of an assortment of other leaders that proxies for general “leader-positivity,” are added in (see Supplemental Appendix B). Yet it still remains positive, and it certainly is not the strong negative relationship that would be observed if good opinions of the United States and Russia were mutually exclusive, or if the things producing good views of one (e.g., “Russian influence”) had strongly negative effects on views of the other.

Furthermore, according to regression analysis of the 2017–2019 Central Asia Barometer, opinion of Russia has a positive effect on opinion of the United States, and vice versa, opinion of Putin has a positive effect on opinion of Trump, and vice versa, and preference for closer economic relations with Russia has a positive effect on preference for closer economic relations with the United States, and vice versa. This is so, with statistical significance, despite the inclusion of numerous control variables, including an average opinion of other Central Asian leaders (see Supplemental Appendix C).

It should be noted that the same applies for China: positive opinion of Russia and the United States correlates with positive opinion of China and vice versa. Approval of the US leadership and approval of the Russian leadership are both positively correlated, with substantive and statistical significance, with approval of the Chinese leadership in 2017–2019 Gallup data, even when accompanied by the fullest set of control variables. Similar full regressions, performed on 2017–2019 CAB data, find statistically and substantively significant positive relationships between (1) opinion of China relative to opinions of the United States and of Russia, (2) opinion of President Xi relative to opinions of Presidents Trump and Putin, and (3) preference for closer economic relations with China relative to preference for closer economic relations with the United States and Russia.

This indicates that high opinion of the United States does not itself translate into a low opinion of Russia, and vice versa. It also suggests that, at the very least, whatever factors generate positive attitudes toward the United States do not have a strong net-negative effect on opinions of Russia, and vice versa. In short, the data do not support the existence of a zero-sum geopolitical dichotomy in Kazakhstani public opinion. On the contrary, surveys show that there is a win-win geopolitical binary, or even trinary,

situation. The main divide appears to be between Kazakhstani who are more favorable toward external engagement in general—thus supporting the country's official multivectoralism, which calls for a balance between foreign powers (Nazarbayev, 1992)—and Kazakhstani who are more isolationist and less favorable toward foreign actors in general.

### **Doubled-edged cultural influence: local conservatism versus US liberalism**

If not Russian influence, what is the cause of Kazakhstan's skepticism toward the United States? In their introduction to *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics*, Peter Katzenstein and Robert Keohane describe several causes of hostility toward the United States. Two of these are based upon people's identification of it as a threat to the autonomy and identity of their own states and nations, either because it is the engine behind globalization or because it promulgates more specific religious and cultural identities that clash with local ones (Katzenstein & Keohane, 2011).

Our focus groups certainly displayed plenty of disapproval of US culture and its influence upon Kazakhstan.

These observations came in response to a variety of questions posed to the participants: What three things come to mind when you hear the word “America”? What are Americans, US society, and US culture like? What is the influence of the United States upon Kazakhstan's culture (including its moral values, and especially its sexual mores, in particular), or the influence of US culture (including things like popular media) upon Kazakhstan? What attributes or experiences of the United States (potentially including cultural ones) should (or should not) be borrowed/followed by Kazakhstan, and in which spheres (potentially including culture) should (or should not) Kazakhstan cooperate with the United States?

In addition, participants also sometimes spontaneously referenced or discussed US culture—most often matters relating to gender and sexual orientation—in the context of other topics.

Overall, of 93 participants, only 3 positively assessed the United States' influence upon Kazakhstani culture, 1 was mixed (expressing both positive and negative views), and 32 were negative. In addition, another 12 participants were not explicitly negative regarding US influence on Kazakhstan, but did characterize US culture itself as deviant, amoral, and/or disorderly.

Among the participants who negatively assessed the influence on Kazakhstan of US culture and values, the by far most common targets of these views were phenomena that can be broadly categorized as sexual/familial values that many Kazakhstani see as nontraditional, deviant, and rendering the United States a “perverted” (*isporchennaia, razvratnaia*) country by their prevalence. And, of these, the

overwhelmingly most common target was homosexuality. In total, 20 participants complained of US culture's negative influence on sexual/familial norms, 19 targeted homosexuality, 2 targeted feminism, and a single complaint was raised regarding the United States' active or passive promotion of each of the following: hypersexuality, pornography, prostitution, divorce, and unfilial attitudes among children.

Another, relatively closely related set of complaints about US influence focused on its perceived promotion of violence, anarchy, and/or disorder. Two participants condemned the violence that they see as endemic to US-origin entertainment and news, particularly for its potential effects on the psyches of younger Kazakhstanis. A third participant saw the United States' promotion of "LGBT" in the country as a means to generating social unrest there. In addition, two participants did not explicitly criticize US influence, but attacked the culture of the United States itself, noting that "they sell arms freely there, and people live in constant stress" and arguing that "they have a country that is so free that any guy can go to a college and shoot it up."

A third category of concern focused on the promotion of individualism and amorality—along with variants of "soullessness" and hyper-capitalism—by US media. Three participants worried about this influence in Kazakhstan, with the clearest such complaint holding that US media promote "that it's every man for himself. In the Soviet Union, they propagandized friendship and solidarity, but now you're supported to be a leader, no matter what . . . This is propagandized [through films and games], and the youth now acts accordingly." Unlike the previous two categories, participants far more frequently discussed this set of negative cultural traits with regard to the United States itself than they did with regard to the United States' influence upon Kazakhstan. (It is unclear whether this reflects a belief that it is for some reason less easily "communicable.") In these discussions, four participants condemned Americans as selfish and capitalistic, saying that in the United States "there is the true face of capitalism," that "everyone lives for themselves," that "life is connected with competition" that "they must survive." Separately, one participant reported that the children of an acquaintance who moved to the United States now seemed to her "not at all like our [Kazakhs'] children," but rather "callous, soulless, strange." But most frequent was the connection, explicitly made by seven participants, between American capitalism and a sort of "hollowness," amorality, or even lack of a soul. The participants saw Americans as over-prioritizing money, self-interest, and career, and undervaluing familial, professional, and general human relations. One said that "they cannot be called good people. They're capitalists." And perhaps the most aggressive critic argued that "they have no values. Over there, there is only one value—money. But with us, that is not the foremost value. We have spirituality, friendship."

A fourth category of concern can be formed around issues of globalization and denationalization. After "sexual/familial deviancy," it contains the most complaints about the negative influence of the United States on Kazakhstani culture. Unlike the other category, though, these allegations seemed to be much less controversial, with not a single participant questioning the existence or normative undesirability of the US influence that was alleged. In all, 10 participants complained about the effect of American culture on that of Kazakhstan. The specific focuses of these complaints ranged from the displacement of native music by American pop music, to the displacement of native tales by the scripts of modern American films, to the displacement of the Kazakh language by the English language, to proselytizing by American religious sects masquerading as aid groups, to the general weakening of national values and traditions by globalization, regardless of whether the process is driven more by US "propaganda" or by an unhealthy desire among Kazakhstanis to mimic the United States.

Participants frequently discussed US popular culture—particularly movies—with regard to all of these categories. Some participants hailed US achievements in cinema and saw the success of Kazakh singers (Dimash) and film directors (Timur Bekmanbetov) in the United States as a cause for pride, but the majority criticized US cultural products as exporting values foreign to Kazakhstan. Several mentioned that the United States "advances its mentality through Hollywood and MTV" and that their "propaganda is spread through movie production." The notion of "poisoning" culture is repeated several times: "They poison the consciousness of our children" (*travit soznanie nashikh detei*); "through culture they spoil/corrupt us" (*cherez kul'tury oni portiat nas*).

This is not to say that the participants did not identify anything in American culture as good. The one aspect of the United States' cultural influence to receive repeated praise is its promotion of self-confidence, achievement, and entrepreneurialism. However, even such seemingly positive features are interpreted with mixed feelings. As mentioned above, two participants praised US media for stimulating self-confidence and entrepreneurialism within Kazakhstan, but others condemned them for promoting what is essentially the other side of the same coin—excessive individualism and an obsession with money.

The concept of "freedom" is another such two-sided coin. Many respondents (22) identified America and/or Americans as "free." Eight were clearly referring, at least in part, to a praiseworthy political/legal system that permits and encourages freedom of speech, freedom of association, democratic election of authorities, and so on. But three saw the United States' freedom as a mainly negative phenomenon: a belief that everything is permitted, leading to wildness/barbarity (*dikost*), or an anarchy that allows college shootings, or at least something that yields behavior that seems unintelligible and "extravagant" to Kazakhstanis.

And another 7 of the 22 respondents were seemingly referring to the *culture* or *nature* of Americans, which they saw as more free/open/liberal than that of Kazakhstanis—not to a difference in the two countries’ political-legal systems. Four of these seven described American society as less constricting: as lacking a culture of shame, as generally more permissive, or as featuring freer and less formal relations. Indeed, more generally, a large number of respondents described Americans as open, honest, and/or able to live comfortably (most prominently, by dressing casually).

Overall, the widespread hostility toward US culture and cultural influence certainly suggests that some of the conditions for anti-Americanism, as identified by Katzenstein and Keohane, are present. However, it does not necessarily demonstrate that they indeed yield the predicted consequences.

But some participants did give such indications. Two participants, while discussing potential Kazakhstani ties and cooperation with the United States, criticized its culture in particular and cast doubt on whether the country had anything of value to offer Kazakhstan. In addition, four participants endorsed economic ties with the United States while explicitly ruling out cultural and/or political ones.

Moreover, we find some evidence from Gallup that national conservatism is, among Kazakhstanis, associated with greater skepticism or hostility toward the United States in particular. Following the epochal Ukraine crisis, the Gallup World poll has twice included a question on migration preferences—whether immigration to Kazakhstan ought to be increased, decreased, or kept the same—in 2015 and 2016. Ordinal regressions over the survey data of these two years reveal that, rather unexpectedly, opposition to immigration into Kazakhstan is associated with a worse opinion of the US leadership, and vice versa. The effect is substantial: moving from favoring more immigration, to favoring less immigration, virtually halves the (already low) predicted probability of approving of US leadership, from .17 to .09. It is also statistically significant, with a  $p$ -value of .00 (see Supplemental Appendix D). Moreover, it does not apply to approval of the *Russian* leadership, the effect there is actually slightly positive, rather than negative, but negligible (+.01) and statistically non-significant ( $p = .62$ ) (see Supplemental Appendix E). This is so, despite our inclusion of an array of control variables, including several—namely, evaluation of the country’s present economic trajectory, and approval of the country’s leadership—that hopefully ensure that immigration preferences are not representing something other than nationalism, such as (dis)satisfaction with the country’s present political, economic, and/or social situation.

Thus, it appears that national conservatism—including in its manifestation as opposition to foreign cultural influence in general, or US cultural influence in particular—is a major cause of hostility or at least caution toward the United States in Kazakhstan.

## The unambiguously negative effects of US foreign policy

The other source of anti-Americanism that Katzenstein and Keohane identify is that of “power imbalances”: fear and resentment of the United States’ dominant position and unrestrained behavior *vis-à-vis* other countries and one’s own. This is reflected, *inter alia*, in measures of countries’ images that highlight US shortfalls in specific areas. For instance, the Global Soft Power Index, which surveyed more than 50,000 consumers in 87 countries, assigns first place in overall “influence” to the United States, grading it highly on entertainment, media, sport, and science. Yet the country’s international relationships are evaluated far more negatively, receiving 44th place out of 60 (Brand Finance, 2020).

And fear and/or resentment of the United States’ international behavior was also manifest in our focus groups. Of the 93 focus group participants, 38 had a more or less negative view of the United States’ international behavior, another 7 had mixed views, or saw US behavior as “natural” or at least inevitable for a state of its power, and only 4 saw it as a basically positive force in the world.

Among those with a negative or mixed view of the United States, the most common grievance with it was its perceived tendency toward violating other countries’ national sovereignty: interfering in their politics, intervening in their internal conflicts, or invading them outright. A total of 27 participants explicitly identified and condemned a pattern of US interference in foreign countries: *inter alia*, complaining that “they carry out regime change, revolutions, wars”; “under the pretext of democracy, they interfere in politics”; “whether it’s your country or not doesn’t much bother them, they think that they can interfere in the life of any country just because they don’t like it”; “America interferes in the politics of other countries”; “they organize and finance different terrorist organizations . . . America is trying to conquer the whole world”; “the U.S. supports the opposition of a country, then the opposition goes against its own government and sparks a war . . . they helped the Syrian, Libyan, and Egyptian oppositions”; “America in recent decades has frequently interfered in the affairs of other countries, all while saying “we’re fighting for world peace”; “the U.S. interferes in other countries’ internal affairs too much”; “the U.S. has always been used to domination . . . which is why they stick their noses in everywhere”; “they themselves once sponsored al-Qaeda”; “they try to impose democracy everywhere”; “the U.S. has no interest in other countries having strong governments/states.”

In addition, many participants cited specific instances of such behavior (not always identifying it as part of a larger pattern). Three participants criticized the United States either for supporting the Taliban or for occupying Afghanistan in its war against them. Five attacked the United States for interfering in Syria, supporting the opposition there, turning the country back into an undeveloped

country, and stealing its oil. Another three leveled similar criticisms with regard to Libya, criticizing the United States for unleashing a war there, ultimately devastating the country, by supporting the opposition. Two more identified Ukraine as another US conquest. But Iraq received by far the most attention, with 10 participants attacking it as a war of aggression and conquest that was launched under false pretenses, motivated by anti-Muslim zeal, and waged to seize the country's oil.

Combined, 33 of the 93 participants attacked the United States for a general pattern of sovereignty-violation and aggression, and/or for specific instances of this in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, or Ukraine. The overwhelming majority of critics of US intervention attributed it primarily or entirely not to military, ideological, or strictly political-strategic goals, but rather to a pursuit of resources or, less often, some other economic benefit (the creation of free trade blocs, support for the domestic military-industrial complex, etc.). In total, 25 participants cited the pursuit of foreigners' resources as the main or only reason for a particular US intervention or invasion, and/or for a more general pattern of US imperialistic behavior—including 21 of the 33 who criticized specific instances, and/or the general pattern, of the United States violating other states' sovereignty. A smaller number (8) proffered anti-Muslim sentiment as a motive for US behavior, either instead of economic/resource-centric ones or, more often, alongside them. Participants accused the United States of "seeking to divide all Muslim countries"; of "imposing the ideology that terrorism and Islam are identical"; of fearing that "in Muslim countries, if the people submit to the government and peace reigns, then prosperity will rapidly begin"; and even of seeking a "genocide" of Muslims. However, just as frequently, participants explicitly rejected this explanation for US behavior in favor of a solely material/resource-based/economic one.

Notably, participants with neutral, mixed, or positive views of the United States' international behavior rarely disagreed with the view of it as highly interventionist—instead, they either saw good things in US behavior aside from its interventionism or more positively viewed the legitimacy, purpose, and consequence of the interventionism itself. Of the seven participants who had basically mixed or neutral views of the United States' behavior, three said that it contains both good and bad. The other four with neutral views all agreed that the United States behaves in an aggressive and overly interventionist manner, but simply held this to be natural, normal, or at least inevitable behavior for a great power. And, of the four participants who saw the United States' international behavior as basically positive, three of them recognized and even praised its interventionist policies: "the U.S. mainly tries to institute democracy . . . it has no pretensions against countries with free elections"; "many people are against the U.S.'s interventions . . . but because [the targets] are wealthy . . . they can do a lot

of wrong things, like buy weapons . . . so I think that the U.S. is acting correctly . . . it looks after its own security."

Overall, then, participants who discussed the United States' international behavior were virtually unanimous in identifying, and primarily or entirely focusing upon, interventionism as a feature of US foreign policy. They only differed—to some extent—in their interpretations of it. While a handful saw it as supporting democracy, opposing radicalism, or protecting American security, more saw it as an inevitable consequence of the United States' position in the international system, and the overwhelming majority (38/49) condemned it, and the United States' international role along with it.

This distribution of opinions was, in several ways, more or less explicitly connected with skepticism or opposition toward ties with the United States, as predicted by Keohane and Katzenstein.

Two participants explicitly linked their rejection of ties with the United States to a fear that it could lead to a dangerous and independence-harming military presence, or to a loss of Russian protection, which is the only thing preventing the country from becoming another Iraq or Syria. Many more participants were somewhat less explicit. One worried that the United States will try to take over Kazakhstan and, unsurprisingly, agreed that the United States' present lack of influence in Kazakhstan is a good thing. And 12 participants thought it likely or certain that the United States supports the Kazakhstani opposition, or would support it if it could. These participants worried that the United States supports the opposition, mainly by financing it secretly through nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Soros Open Society Foundation, and that it might conduct a "Maidan" in Kazakhstan or even "turn the country into Syria." Of these 12, 4 explicitly opposed US ties, and a fifth endorsed economic but not political or cultural ones. The remaining seven did not state their positions on ties with the United States, but it is unlikely that they are very positive.

As mentioned above, many participants saw US foreign policy as motivated by economic self-interest, mainly the exploitation of other countries' natural resources. Unsurprisingly, then, four participants explicitly rejected ties with the United States, or at least identified them as quite dangerous, out of fear that it will take the opportunity to exploit Kazakhstan. These participants worried that "the U.S. tries to take control of other countries' oil under the pretext of [fighting] terrorism"; that "our country is rich in natural resources" and the United States thus "wants to take us under its control before we have become a developed nation"; that "we have oil, and the [Americans] could just conquer us"; and that "the U.S. could devour us economically." In addition, another 13 participants expressed concerns that the United States' interest in Kazakhstan is primarily or entirely exploitative, without explicitly tying this concern to an opposition to ties with the United States or describing it as an overwhelming danger.

Finally, another US-foreign-behavior-related cause of wariness toward ties with the United States, which surfaced repeatedly in the focus groups, is the country's conflict with Russia and the dangers that this poses to Kazakhstan. Six participants identified this as the main or sole cause of US interest in Kazakhstan: Kazakhstan's status as "a neighbor of Russia"; Kazakhstan's potential "as an instrument against Russia." And another two explicitly identified this as a source of danger to Kazakhstan—and a reason that "Kazakhstan must remain maximally neutral," or that the "multivectoral, balanced policy," which Kazakhstan pursues "in contrast to Ukraine," should be maintained.

The negative effect of the United States' international behavior upon its image in Kazakhstan is also strongly supported by CAB data. As noted above, the CAB indicates that positive opinion of the United States is marginally more prevalent than negative opinion. However, when participants were asked to identify up to two reasons for their opinions, 83% of the reasons cited for a positive opinion of the United States were the country's high level of (mostly economic) development, while its strength and benevolent conduct on the international stage comprised only 17% of responses. Conversely, international factors were overwhelmingly cited by those with a negative opinion of the United States: perceived US aggression and violation of others' sovereignty comprised 81% of the reasons cited for a negative opinion, whereas objectionable political and economic factors within the United States made up only 19% (Figure 2).

Thus, as suggested by the focus groups, the United States' international behavior is perceived by most Kazakhstanis as activist or interventionist. But while it is occasionally seen as a force for good, and thus serves as a cause for admiration, the reality is that the overwhelming majority of those Kazakhstanis who favor the United States do so out of admiration for its *domestic* qualities—specifically, its high level of material development. The United States' international conduct is far more often a cause for distrust and dislike of the country—indeed, it appears to be the primary cause.

### **Kazakhstanis' preferences regarding relations with the United States**

Kazakhstanis' ambivalent perception of the United States—in large part caused by the abovementioned cultural and foreign policy factors—also translated into wariness regarding ties between their country and the United States. A total of 19 participants rejected ties with the United States in all spheres, or explicitly rejected some without indicating a position on others, while 10 supported maintaining or strengthening ties in all spheres, or endorsed some without indicating a position on others, and another 4 endorsed ties solely in the economic realm, but not in others. It should be

noted that this distribution of opinion is likely as US-favorable as it is because many participants did not see certain US ties as exclusive of ties and relations with Russia; as we have noted elsewhere, the former tend to fare poorly when placed in a zero-sum competition. For instance, in 2014 (the most recent year in which the question was asked by Gallup), 72% of Kazakhstanis prioritized relations with Russia over those with the United States, 21% said that relations with both were desirable, and only 7% prioritized relations with the United States over those with Russia (Gallup, 2014).

In addition, of the 10 participants who were generally favorable toward the United States, the precise strength and nature of desired ties was somewhat varied. One participant only endorsed increased economic cooperation that could have "mutually-beneficial results." Another five gave more or less blanket endorsements of cooperation and ties with the United States: "we should try to cooperate with the U.S., since we've already learned all we can from the Russians—the good and the bad"; "we should strengthen economic relations"; "we should [strengthen relations with the U.S.]—after all, they have freedom of speech, while we have corruption, intolerance of others' speech"; "we can't prevent their cultural influence . . . and I support their economic influence"; and "we should develop relations in every sphere."

However, the actual bounds of the desired cooperation, and the degree to which these participants would be willing to prioritize it at the expense of other relationships, is unclear. Indeed, beyond (and including) these five, a great many participants (28) identified US science, technology, education, and/or medicine as something worthy of adoption or imitation (*pereniati*). But most apparently did not see closer general ties with the United States, or specifically political, economic, or cultural ones, as actually necessary for this—or they did not see the benefits as outweighing the costs. Thus, respect for the achievements of another country, in particular spheres, need not yield a positive view of that country overall, and certainly does not guarantee a willingness to develop broad ties with it. Indeed, many respondents explicitly supported the "filtration" of US "imports"—particularly cultural ones: "We need to communicate more [with the U.S.]. So that economic relations improve, so that we economically benefit each other. But if they come with programs such as LGBT, we have to reject them." "Just because we borrow technology from America, this does not mean that we have to change everything." "We should try to receive from them only the good, and keep our distance from their bad features."

The third set of participants held a far clearer position on relations with the United States: largely ignoring questions of the good or bad aspects of US influence, these four expressed, or implied, endorsement of a strong relationship or outright alliance with the United States, mainly or entirely as a means of protecting Kazakhstan from Russia

reasons named by those with positive opinions	as proportion of...			
	first answer	second answer	both (first and second) answers	both answers, excluding other/ref./etc.
a developed and strong economy	34%	13%	24%	30%
high quality of life	20%	17%	19%	23%
the country has a lot of money	6%	10%	8%	11%
the world leader in the political and economic arena	8%	6%	7%	9%
high wages	3%	7%	5%	6%
the guarantor of democracy and freedom around the world	5%	3%	4%	5%
high level of education	3%	5%	4%	5%
a strong welfare state	3%	4%	4%	5%
strongest and best-equipped military	2%	2%	2%	2%
low level of unemployment	1%	2%	1%	2%
good housing conditions, high quality and affordability of housing	1%	2%	1%	1%
helps other countries (financially, materially)	1%	1%	1%	1%
absence of corruption	1%	1%	1%	1%
actively fights terrorism around the world	0%	0%	0%	0%
other / refused / don't know / none	11%	28%	20%	

reasons named by those with negative opinions	as proportion of...			
	first answer	second answer	both (first and second) answers	both answers, excluding other/ref./etc.
aggressive foreign policy	39%	13%	26%	42%
interference in the internal politics of sovereign countries	15%	13%	14%	22%
pursuit of total global domination	8%	11%	10%	16%
(bad) political system and views in general	8%	6%	7%	11%
high taxes	1%	3%	2%	4%
expensive medical care	1%	2%	1%	2%
negative perception of the president	2%	1%	1%	2%
imposition of sanctions, warmongering	1%	1%	1%	1%
other / refused / don't know / unclear answer / none	25%	51%	38%	

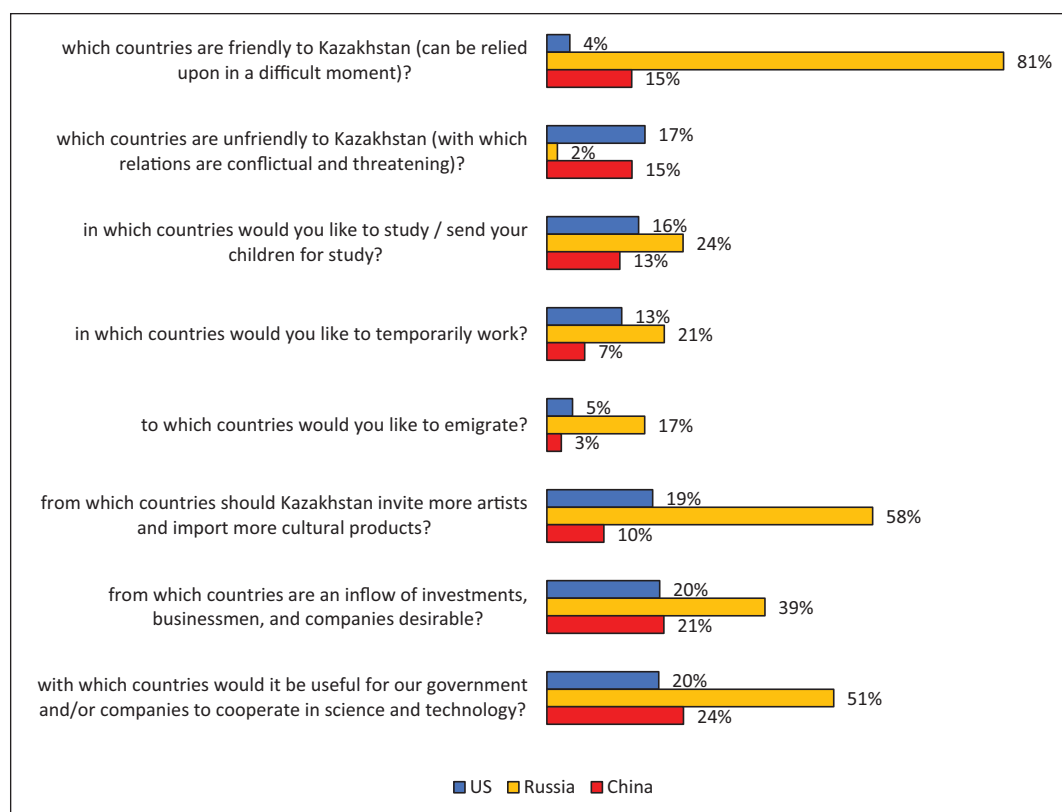
**Figure 2.** Reasons for opinions of the United States.  
 Source: Central Asia Barometer, aggregated data for 2017–2019.

and China. Thus, these participants assumed that the United States is in competition with Russia (and China)—but, unlike those discussed above, saw this as a good thing, and a reason for Kazakhstan to strengthen ties with the United States. One participant stated that

China is a powerful country with a communist single-party regime. And in Russia there's the Putin regime. These aren't

democratic countries. If Kazakhstan is threatened by them, I trust only the U.S. I believe that they and Turkey can protect us.

Another argued that “there is no open aggression against us from the U.S., like there is from China and Russia.” A third saw the United States as “necessary for the maintenance of competition . . . if they have the chance, Russia and China are ready to swallow us . . . But from the U.S. there is no



**Figure 3.** Percentage of Kazakhstani adhering to various perceptions of the United States, Russia, and China, 2017. Source: Eurasian Integration Barometer (2017).

danger.” All three also endorsed tighter relations with the United States in at least the economic realm. And the fourth argued that “We border Russia on one side, and China on the other. That is why we must maintain relations with the U.S.”

On balance, then, participants were wary of closer ties with the United States, often because they feared its cultural influence or its foreign behavior, which they saw as sovereignty-violating, aggressive, exploitative, and/or likely to drag them into conflict with Russia. However, some were more open to some degree of relations with the United States, or even US influence, either specifically in the economic realm or in the education and science domain. And a small minority of participants preferred ties with the United States precisely because they saw it as a guarantee against Russia and China, either because it is seen as more democratic than them or, more commonly, because it is much farther away and consequently less of a threat.

These findings are corroborated by the Eurasian Integration Barometer (see Figure 3). Russia greatly outperforms both China and the United States in all respects. The United States does about as well as China on economic and cultural matters, but substantially worse on political ones (with, notably, hardly any Kazakhstani identifying the United States as a friendly country). And even its most

popular sectors, such as technology and investment, are attractive to only about a fifth of Kazakhstani.

## Conclusion

In many respects, the United States’ international behavior has undercut its own cultural attractiveness: broad resentment of US foreign policy, particularly of what most Kazakhstani see as aggressive behavior toward both the Middle East and Russia, undermine the United States’ assertion of its own preferred image, that of a power supporting democracy and peace.

Furthermore, the values that support and are supported by US cultural influence receive a mixed reception in Kazakhstan. Certain anti-American attitudes there may have some roots in the Soviet period—in particular, associations of the United States with capitalism and of capitalism with immorality or evil. But others are products of more fundamental cultural differences, which may, in fact, have only intensified in the last three decades, due to the consolidation of nationhood in Central Asia and to real or perceived changes within the United States itself.

Following independence, Central Asians initially welcomed the flood of once-forbidden US cultural products, primarily via the television. But their audience soon grew tired of them—and, to a significant degree, alienated,

frightened, and offended by particular elements of US popular culture: violence, sex, obscenity, and actual or perceived nihilism. Much of Kazakhstani society now favors, at least in principle, a reassertion of traditional culture and morality. On such matters (especially homosexuality, but also marriage, divorce, abortion, gender roles, and more) Kazakhstani society (including its elites, urban middle classes, and youth) is actually quite conservative relative not only to Western Europe and the United States, but also to Russia.<sup>3</sup> Tensions with US cultural influences will thus result from these divisions—regardless of whether Russian public diplomacy employs them to discredit the West—and have a doubled-edged effect in Kazakhstan.

A more inevitable reaction, one that is observable to varying degrees across the world, has also sprung up irrespective of the merits—or lack thereof—of these cultural exports: a fear that globalization will see national culture “crowded out” by foreign, usually American, competition. Many explicitly or implicitly called for a less American, and/or more national, culture. And, as foreign policy views are largely based on individuals’ holistic value systems and social interactions (Rathbun et al., 2016), this places “homegrown” obstacles in the way of any effort that the United States might make to extend its influence into Kazakhstan.

Overall, our findings suggest that US ties with Kazakhstan in the realms of science, technology, and perhaps education—instead of efforts to establish political, military, or even cultural influence—are likely the most productive form of outreach. Surveys and focus groups suggest that the United States’ science, technology, and (to somewhat lesser extent) education are widely admired in Kazakhstan, and this to some extent may translate into Kazakhstani willingness and desire to actually cooperate with the United States on these matters. Furthermore, cooperation in such areas is relatively cheap and can be advanced by private as well as governmental actors. And, perhaps more importantly, there is little to no negative perception of cooperation in science, technology, or education.

Voluntary cooperation in those areas will therefore, in contrast to cultural influence, not carry the risk of “blowback”—be it driven by general resistance to globalization and Americanization, or by the gulf between US and Kazakhstani cultures in particular—that partly or fully counteracts any positive effects. Focus group participants’ frequent admiration of Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, as states that modernized their economies, technology, and education systems without undergoing cultural westernization, suggests the importance that they place on finding the right balance between modernity and the preservation of perceived national traditions. And, in contrast to attempts to establish political or military influence, scientific and technological cooperation will not spark fear within a population that is generally skeptical of the purposes and consequences of the United States’ international behavior,

or force that population to make a zero-sum choice between the United States and other countries that the United States is unlikely to win.

Yet, even if the United States were to focus on these strengths—rather than upon cultural influence, whose net effects in Kazakhstan are far from clear—its public image in that country would remain burdened by widespread dislike and fear of the US foreign policy. In Kazakhstan, at least, the public image of the United States appears to be inextricable from the US actions beyond Kazakhstan’s borders.

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### Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### Notes

1. Administration officials have typically been reluctant to spell out the more confrontational aspects of this policy, although ex-administration officials, congressmen, and think-tankers have been far less circumspect. But there have been at least a few relatively explicit explanations of the administration position: According to the Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs in 2006, the countries of Central Asia “need outlets and options; [they] don’t want to be stuck between two big powers” (Boucher, 2006). According to the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs in 2005, “. . . our policy is to help” Central Asian states to avoid “[coming] under the domination of any large neighbor” (Fried, 2005, p. 15).
2. Based on authors’ private discussions with Kazakhstani delegations visiting Washington, D.C.
3. See, for instance, the varying levels of approval for out-of-wedlock sex, divorce, abortion, and homosexuality, in the Wave 6 (the most recent completed) of the World Values Survey (2014). Kazakhstani public opinion is less favorable than Western countries and even Russia.

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