



# POINTS OF VIEW

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No. 2/2025 | January 2025

## **Connecting the Connectivities between Thailand and Kazakhstan<sup>1</sup>**

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2024 is a productive year for Thailand and Kazakhstan relationship. A number of high-level visits between the two countries took place with deliverables that pave the way for closer cooperation. In February, Thailand's [Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs](#) together with Minister of Tourism and Sports paid a visit to Astana and Almaty to explore ways to promote trade, investment and tourism. Responding to the invitation by Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs to visit Thailand as guest of the Ministry during the UNESCAP meeting, Kazakhstan's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs [Murat Nurtleu](#) made an official visit to Bangkok in April 2024 to sign a visa-free agreement for national passport holders of both countries. The two countries also recognised each other as key partner.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a deliverable of the project "Enhancing Networks in Promoting Thai Food in Central Asia through the Participation in FoodExpo Qazaqstan 2024" supported by the Department of International Economic Relations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand and the Royal Thai Embassy in Astana on 7-16 November 2024. The author wishes to express his appreciation to Dr. Orathai Phubunlap Gunaseelan for her valuable support and advice.

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In August, Thailand's [Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Commerce](#) visited Astana and had a discussion with Prime Minister of Kazakhstan Oljas Bektenov. During his visit, the Minister signed an Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation. There were also discussions with various sectors on plan to open a Thai Trade Office in Kazakhstan. One month later, Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives of Thailand [Narumon Pinyosinwat](#) paid an official visit to discuss bilateral cooperation and sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on agricultural cooperation. These high-level visits created a momentum for the two countries to enhance connectivity in all dimensions.

Thailand and Kazakhstan have several similar characteristics. The two countries are located strategically in the middle of the region, allowing them to play a role as “bridge-builder” in logistics, institutional and people-to-people connectivity. Starting in 2017, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), known as the Middle Corridor, is expected to open a new opportunity for connecting Southeast Asia and Central Asia in the post COVID-19 era. According to The World Bank's [report](#) entitled “Middle Trade and Transport Corridor”, the volume of container traffic passing through the Corridor increased 33 per cent in 2021-2022, triggered by the Russia-Ukraine War. To maximise the benefit of the Corridor, four countries, namely Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Türkiye signed a “Roadmap” on prioritised investments and actions required for improving the Corridor in November 2022. One year later, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Kazakhstan set up a joint logistics operator with confirmed support from key international financial institutions, including the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and The World Bank.

The Corridor will help boost inter-regional trade by shortening the time for multimodal transportation. It takes approximately 11-12 days from Xi'an to Baku and 21 days from Xi'an to

Istanbul. Total cost for carrying a twenty-foot equivalent unit (TEU) container will be around USD 4,700-5,300. A UNESCAP [policy brief](#) on “Southeast Asia-North and Central Asia transport corridors to support strengthening transport connectivity between the two subregions” stated that the Corridor is beneficial to Southeast Asia by increasing volumes of oil products, fertilizers, agricultural goods, metal products and other containerised goods. The route is also prioritised by European freight market participants. Therefore, the Corridor will open a new window of opportunity for Thai and ASEAN transport operators and exporters.

In term of people-to-people connectivity, Thailand is a preferred tourism destination for Kazakhstani people. According to [Tourism Authority of Thailand](#), Kazakhstan is “one of Thailand’s fastest growing markets” with 190% growth rate in 2022-2023. Most of Kazakhstani people traveling to Thailand are family and couples with average 10 days of stay in Phuket, Chon Buri, Krabi and Phang-Nga. They spend approximately THB 75,080 per person. This phenomenon derived from two main factors: visa exemption and the increase in number of flights between the two countries. It is [anticipated](#) that Air Astana, Kazakhstan’s national airline will operate 624 flights from October 2024 through March 2025 with the inaugural direct flight from Astana to Phuket on 26 October 2024. Apart from Air Astana, it is reported that Sunday Airlines (under Scat Airlines) operates charter flights to Phuket from Almaty, Astana, Taraz and Shymkent with an impressive 95% load factor. [Thai AirAsia X](#) is also considering launching a direct flight between the two countries. This is evidence of stronger relationship as well as increasing importance the two countries attach to each other.

According to [Orathai Phubunlap Gunaseelan](#), Chargé d’Affaires at the Royal Thai Embassy in Astana, the name of Thailand and Kazakhstan literally means “the land of the free” in their own languages. The two countries also shared the concept of ability to endure challenges with calmness

in the words *Sabyr* in Kazakh and *Sabai Sabai* in Thai. Thai food is attractive to Kazakhstani people. The Thai restaurants in Astana (Tom Yum Bar) and Almaty (@Bangkok) are always full of customers. In December, the [movie](#) *Bisharashki v Thailand* (or *The Poor in Thailand*) was premiered at the Halyk IMAX Kinopark 16 Cinema in Almaty, Kazakhstan, the largest cinema in Central Asia. The story is about the misadventures of a rich Kazakh family that is rescued by Thai people and police. The movie, filmed in Thailand, promotes positive image of Thai people and officials among the Kazakhstani public.

Academic and research collaboration is another area that should be explored and enhanced. During my visit to Astana and Almaty, I had an opportunity to learn from scholars, researchers and students. My observation is that universities and think tanks in the two cities are well known internationally and equipped with knowledgeable personnels. Facilities at universities are impressive and modern. I strongly encourage Thai universities to expand their cooperation with Kazakhstan in terms of joint research, exchanges of professors and students and co-organised events, including seminars, workshops and summer/winter schools. The Royal Thai Embassy in Astana is in the process of establishing a research unit on Central Asia that affiliates with a Thai university. This will serve as a formal platform to engage between Thai and Kazakhstani scholars.

Ongoing geopolitical and geoeconomic competition is generally perceived as a challenge to the global and regional order. However, it could be an enabling factor to enhance cooperation among middle powers. Thailand and Kazakhstan have shared goodwill, friendship and substantive progress in bilateral relationship. I hope this will continue in 2025 and enhance in the years ahead.