



# JOURNAL

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## **ASEAN-Kazakhstan Relations and Implications for Thailand**

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### **Abstract**

The article examines Kazakhstan's relations with the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) thus far and prospects for their enhanced engagement. It looks at ASEAN's place in Kazakhstan's foreign policy and how Kazakhstan has tried to engage with ASEAN and to become part of its dialogue mechanisms. It examines areas for potential greater engagement primarily due to Kazakhstan's central role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its membership of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which has increased ASEAN's interest in Kazakhstan. It lastly explores the implications for Thailand, especially how it can play a role in strengthening ASEAN-Kazakhstan relations.

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## **ASEAN in Kazakhstan's foreign policy**

Kazakhstan has tried to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy since gaining independence following the Soviet Union's collapse in December 1991. This policy seeks to maintain good relations with all the major players on the global stage, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).<sup>1</sup> Kazakhstan well recognises that ASEAN, which now encompasses all ten Southeast Asian countries, is growing in global importance. It has a population of nearly 650 million, a combined GDP of US\$ 2,986 billion and a steady GDP growth of around 5 percent annually.<sup>2</sup> ASEAN's importance is also due to the fact that it has often taken the lead in Asia-Pacific regionalism, through establishments of dialogue mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and the East Asia Summit (EAS). Kazakhstan, therefore, sees ASEAN as a potential large market for its trade and investment and that enhanced engagement with ASEAN would also mean Kazakhstan's greater political and economic integration into the dynamically growing Asia-Pacific region. However, while Kazakhstan has often tried to engage with ASEAN and to participate in its fora, it has so far achieved limited success.

According to Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy Concept for 2014-2020, the "Asian vector" was focused on "enhancing cooperation in trade, investment, economic and technology with the countries of East, South, Southeast Asia, the Asia-Pacific region and their regional associations."<sup>3</sup> Although ASEAN was not named in this Concept, Kazakhstan's new Foreign Policy Concept for 2020-2030, which was approved by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev on 6 March 2020, does mention ASEAN as one of the regional organisations that Kazakhstan should expand relations with and that relations with Southeast Asian countries should be strengthened.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Kazakhstan has long seen 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.”<sup>5</sup> Kazakhstan, therefore, has often expressed its wish to strengthen relations with ASEAN. Since 1995, Kazakhstan informed ASEAN of its intention to become a member of the ARF several times. Nonetheless, no significant progress was made perhaps due to the fact that the level of Kazakhstan’s political and economic engagement with ASEAN was seen as insufficient. The ARF also had a moratorium in place since 1996 due to concern about the Forum expanding too rapidly to the detriment of its consolidation. However, this was not strictly complied with as in subsequent years other countries were admitted as ARF members, the last being Sri Lanka in 2007. Since then, the ARF has yet to set a precedent on how to address outstanding applications and the issue of the lifting of the moratorium has not been discussed again in the ARF. The issue of Kazakhstan’s application to the ARF was never discussed in detail in the ARF as well.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, some Kazakhstani experts believed that it was necessary for Kazakhstan, before joining the ARF, to develop a comprehensive and structured vision of participation, together with the aims and expected results, and a plan of action. This should be gradually implemented, perhaps beginning with a status of dialogue partner in order to participate in relevant meetings of the ARF, and to gather the support of the majority of member states.<sup>7</sup>

Kazakhstan had also applied for ASEAN dialogue-partner status, but a moratorium on applications had been imposed since 1999. The miniscule volume of trade between Kazakhstan and ASEAN countries was another obstacle. According to ASEAN Secretariat figures, trade turnover between ASEAN and Kazakhstan in 2017 was US\$ 579 million which amounts to a mere 0.03 percent of ASEAN’s total trade with the rest of the world in the same year (US\$ 1.98 trillion).<sup>8</sup>

Although Kazakhstan's trade statistics are higher at US\$ 975.2 million in the same year, this still only represents 1.25 percent of Kazakhstan's total trade with the whole world.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, both ASEAN's and Kazakhstan's share in each other's total trade has been very low. One main reason for this low trade is the vast geographical distance and weak transport and logistical links between ASEAN countries and Kazakhstan. In January 2014, Kazakhstan appointed its Ambassador to Indonesia as its first Ambassador to ASEAN. However, according to the ASEAN Secretariat, since then there has been no substantive cooperation between ASEAN and Kazakhstan, and Kazakhstan is yet neither a sectoral dialogue partner nor observer.<sup>10</sup> As the prospects for Kazakhstan becoming an ASEAN dialogue partner, or attaining any other partnership status, in the near future appears dim, some Kazakhstani experts have proposed another way to enhance ASEAN-Kazakhstan relations by establishing a C5+1 dialogue with ASEAN, such as that held between the five Central Asian countries with Japan, the US, South Korea and India, as an idea worth exploring.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Japan, which was the first country to propose establishing such a C5+1 dialogue mechanism in 2004, actually modelled it on its own engagement with ASEAN, borrowing from the ASEAN+3 (Japan, South Korea and China) model.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, such a dialogue framework would not be something new for ASEAN.

Furthermore, Kazakhstan has tried to establish cooperation between ASEAN and organisations that Kazakhstan was a member of or played a leading role. For example, First President Nursultan Nazarbayev was keen on strengthening cooperation between the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) with ASEAN, and in April 2005, the secretariats of the two organisations signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to undertake cooperation in various security and socio-economic fields.<sup>13</sup> Nazarbayev also proposed strengthening cooperation between ASEAN and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia

(CICA), a regional organisation which he initiated, by pushing for a MoU between them but this has yet to be achieved. He further 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 CICA, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and ASEAN.<sup>14</sup> However, while the OSCE was generally receptive, ASEAN’s response was muted. Another area of cooperation that has often been discussed was between ASEAN’s Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ) and the Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone Treaty (CANWFZ), of which Kazakhstan is an active member. In August 2019, Kazakhstan hosted a seminar on the Development and Strengthening of Consultation Mechanisms between Existing Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones, which brought together representatives of all nuclear-weapon-free zones, including SEANWFZ, for consultations.<sup>15</sup>

Another area for further ASEAN-Kazakhstan engagement is Kazakhstan’s interest in applying the ASEAN experience as one possible model for Central Asian regionalism. As then Kazakhstani Foreign Minister Erlan Idrissov stated, Kazakhstan was interested in the ASEAN experience and mechanisms to strengthen and develop regional cooperation in Central Asia.<sup>16</sup> Some Kazakhstani analysts see the tasks facing ASEAN at its inception similar to those currently facing Central Asian states namely, economic depression, unresolved interethnic and territorial problems, and great-power rivalry in the region. In their view, ASEAN’s success in uniting small states to withstand pressure from larger states is also attractive for Central Asian states who are currently facing an even more precarious balance of power.<sup>17</sup> As one Kazakhstani analyst noted, “Central Asian states could possibly create their own regional platform similar to ASEAN to resist

the expansion of China, Russia or America.”<sup>18</sup> Such views that ASEAN can be one model for Central Asian regionalism are also shared and espoused by experts outside the region.<sup>19</sup>

### **Kazakhstan’s central role in China’s Belt and Road Initiative**

In recent years, there has been growing interest for developing economic and transport linkages between ASEAN and Central Asia. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which encompasses China’s ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ announced by President Xi Jinping in Astana in 2013 together with China’s ‘21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road’ announced in Jakarta the same year, has meant that ASEAN countries have begun to explore ways to connect Southeast Asia to Central Asia in a single economic corridor.<sup>20</sup> As Kazakhstan is the largest country in Central Asia and is centrally located, it plays a pivotal role in China’s BRI connecting Europe and Asia, and has therefore attracted the greater attention of ASEAN countries. The implementation of Kazakhstan’s “Nurly Zhol” (Bright Path) infrastructure programme, which was launched in 2014 and is closely linked to China’s BRI, helps position the country as a transit and trade bridge between Europe and Asia. As then Kazakhstani Deputy Foreign Minister Askar Mussinov told ASEAN ambassadors, the Nurly Zhol programme was an opportunity to develop closer comprehensive economic relations with the ASEAN countries.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Kazakhstan, as a key country on China’s “new Silk Road”, was specially invited to participate in the China-ASEAN Exposition for the first time in September 2017 in Nanning, where it showcased its products with the hope of enhancing Kazakhstan’s economic relations with ASEAN countries.<sup>22</sup>

ASEAN countries are also attracted to the fact that Kazakhstan has a more developed economy and infrastructure than any other Central Asian country. These include the Khorgos transport and logistics hub on the border with China, the Western China-Western Europe

international highway, the Aktau seaport, as well as the Kazakh logistics terminal in Lianyungang port in China. By utilising these advantages, Kazakhstan would be able to provide links between the other Central Asian states with ASEAN countries. The transportation of goods between Europe and ASEAN via the Khorgos-Lianyungang land route and then by sea from Lianyungang port to the ASEAN countries is at least twice as fast as via the Indian Ocean and therefore saves both time and money. It is a particular advantage for the transport of foodstuff and other perishable goods.<sup>23</sup> Viet Nam has already started to use the route through China and Kazakhstan. In March 2019, Vietnamese goods were for the first time transported by train via the Viet Nam – China – Kazakhstan – Europe route, starting from Hanoi and ending in Duisberg, Germany, taking 22 days, including 2 days for the transportation of goods from Viet Nam to China at the Vietnamese border railway terminal of Dong Dang. Furthermore, goods between Viet Nam and Kazakhstan can also be transported via the Kazakhstan terminal in Lianyungang port, through which Kazakh wheat is transported to Viet Nam. It is expected that both routes would boost trade between Kazakhstan and Viet Nam even more.<sup>24</sup> Following Viet Nam's success in utilising this Lianyungang-Khorgos route, the Thai Embassy in Kazakhstan launched a project in August 2019 to explore the possibility of Thai exporters using the same route in order to overcome the logistics and transport obstacles they are currently facing.<sup>25</sup> Kazakhstan's central position in China's BRI has therefore attracted ASEAN's greater attention and would help overcome the current obstacles to trade, namely transport and logistical problems.

### **The Eurasian Economic Union factor**

Another opportunity for increasing trade between Kazakhstan and ASEAN is through the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), of which Kazakhstan is a member. The imposition of Western

sanctions on Russia following its annexation of Crimea in 2014 affected the economies of all the EAEU member countries, including Kazakhstan, forcing them to look towards Asia, especially China, for further economic opportunities. However, growing Chinese economic influence in Central Asia, including through its BRI, is increasingly viewed with concern by Central Asian countries.<sup>26</sup> This concern had prompted some of the EAEU countries to look towards the countries of ASEAN in order to help balance China's growing economic influence in Central Eurasia. For example, one Kazakhstani expert has suggested that cooperation between Central Asian states and ASEAN to develop a free trade agreement could be "one alternative to Chinese domination in Central Asia."<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, according to another Kazakhstani expert, ASEAN has a more positive image in Central Asia than China, which opens up opportunities for greater cooperation between ASEAN and Central Asia.<sup>28</sup>

ASEAN has also been studying the possibility of an ASEAN-EAEU free trade agreement. Due to the sanctions on Russia, which has affected all the EAEU economies, there has been pent-up demand for produce, especially in Russia, and ASEAN is seen as the logical alternative supplier.<sup>29</sup> A MoU on economic cooperation was signed in November 2018 between ASEAN and the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC), which is the EAEU's executive and regulatory body. Some ASEAN member countries have already concluded a free trade agreement with the EAEU or expressed interest to do so. Viet Nam signed a free trade agreement with the EAEU in May 2015, which led to a significant increase in trade between Viet Nam and Kazakhstan. In 2017, trade between the two countries increased by 48 per cent reaching US\$ 542 million. Kazakhstan's exports to Viet Nam grew by 63 per cent due to the increase in supplies of food, agricultural products and metals.<sup>30</sup> In October 2019, Singapore became the second ASEAN country to sign a free trade agreement with the EAEU.<sup>31</sup> As a first step towards possible conclusion of a free trade



agreement with the EAEU, Indonesia, Cambodia and Thailand have all signed a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) with the EEC. Thailand is particularly interested in concluding a free trade agreement with the EAEU. It recognises the disadvantage from being slower than other ASEAN countries as it means that at present Thai exports to Kazakhstan are much more expensive and less competitive than goods from, for instance, Viet Nam.<sup>32</sup> ASEAN countries' interest to strengthen economic relations with the EAEU opens up the possibility of an increase in trade between Kazakhstan and ASEAN, as in Viet Nam's case, and might lead to ASEAN countries becoming a potential counterweight to Chinese economic influence as well as help provide more balance in Kazakhstan's foreign relations.

### **Trends in ASEAN-Kazakhstan relations**

President Tokayev has made clear that Kazakhstan will continue the foreign policy course of his predecessor, First President Nazarbayev.<sup>33</sup> This would include the multi-vector foreign policy which Tokayev himself had helped developed and implemented when he was at the foreign ministry. Indeed, foreign policy continuity and a multi-vector policy are both outlined as basic foreign policy principles in the new foreign policy concept.<sup>34</sup> As Tokayev had written earlier, fate itself determined that Kazakhstan pursue a multi-vector foreign policy due to the country's central position in Eurasia, and that "it would be unnatural and even harmful to avoid cooperation with the countries of South and Southeast Asia..."<sup>35</sup> Tokayev also has direct experience working in Southeast Asia. He started his training at the Soviet Foreign Ministry in the Southeast Asia department and his first work abroad was at the consular section in the Soviet Embassy in Singapore and later in the political section (1975-1979). He would later return to Moscow to work on Soviet-Chinese relations and become a China specialist.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, as a former foreign

minister, Tokayev is familiar with ASEAN and is likely to maintain good relations with it. Tokayev also shares Nazarbayev's admiration and respect for Lee Kuan Yew and Singapore.<sup>37</sup> This was evident in Tokayev's remarks to Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at a meeting during the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council in Armenia in October 2019 that Singapore "is highly respected in Kazakhstan" and that the close relationship between Lee Kuan Yew and Nazarbayev formed the background for very close relations between the two countries.<sup>38</sup>

It is also possible that President Tokayev would pursue a more Asian-focused foreign policy due to his own expertise and interest in Asia. While China would unavoidably and understandably remain the focus of Kazakhstan's Asia policy, it is likely that ASEAN's prominence would rise as well. This was indicated in Tokayev's plan to visit Southeast Asia in late 2020, including to Thailand. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus worldwide has made this visit less certain. For Kazakhstan, each of the ASEAN countries represent a "niche", the relations with which could benefit Kazakhstan's interests. For example, Singapore is a model of a successful advanced economy that Kazakhstan has tried to emulate, especially in terms of economy and finance as well as human resource development, while Thailand is a leader in the tourism and service-based industry, an area which Kazakhstan is trying to promote. Both Malaysia and Indonesia are moderate Muslim countries like Kazakhstan that share common positions on, for instance, the fight against international terrorism and extremism, dialogue between civilisations, and dialogue between the Muslim world and the West. Kazakhstan is also particularly interested in learning from Malaysia's experience in the halal food industry and Malaysia is a popular destination for Kazakh students.

For ASEAN, Kazakhstan's importance as the 'buckle' 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 Viet Nam-China-Kazakhstan-Europe railway route offers exporters access to ASEAN markets. This could also provide an alternative to sea transportation, allowing goods from Southeast Asia to be delivered to Europe through EAEU member states, such as Kazakhstan, in the shortest time. Tokayev also sees great potential in linking up the EAEU economic space with ASEAN.<sup>39</sup> All of this would lead to further economic engagement between the EAEU and ASEAN, which would help strengthen economic relations between Kazakhstan and ASEAN, thereby making their relations more substantive. Intensified economic relations would lead to eventual exploration of the possible establishment of dialogue mechanisms between ASEAN and Kazakhstan. ASEAN might consider granting dialogue partner status to Kazakhstan or, if that is not possible, to establish an ASEAN+Kazakhstan dialogue framework. A C5+ASEAN dialogue, similar to those between the five Central Asian states with Japan, the US, South Korea and India, is also another possibility that would bring greater mutual benefits and comprehensive cooperation between the two regions. This could start with the senior officials' level as a first step to explore avenues for cooperation.

### **Implications for Thailand**

For Kazakhstan, Thailand is a key country in ASEAN due to its recognised leading role since ASEAN's inception in 1967 and being ASEAN's second largest economy (GDP of US\$ 505 billion in 2018), after Indonesia, with ASEAN's fourth largest population (nearly 68 million in 2018).<sup>40</sup> Relations between Kazakhstan and Thailand have been cordial and relatively close since the establishment of diplomatic ties on 6 July 1992. Thailand was also one of five ASEAN countries explicitly mentioned in Kazakhstan's previous foreign policy concept: the other four were Viet Nam, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. However, no particular Southeast Asian country is

mentioned in Kazakhstan's current new foreign policy concept for 2020-2030.<sup>41</sup> Politically, there has been a steady exchange of high-level visits and meetings. An Intergovernmental Joint Commission was established in 1993 to serve as the key platform for dialogue on all aspects of bilateral relations, but has only met three times with plans for a fourth to be hosted by Thailand sometime later. Thailand also supports the work of CICA, which was Kazakhstan's initiative, and was the first ASEAN country to join in 2004. The two countries also enjoy close cooperation and support in international fora, including the UN, and share similar positions on such issues as nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament and the peaceful settlement of disputes. Despite their competition for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for the term 2017-2018 from the Asia-Pacific group, in which Kazakhstan won, both sides conducted their campaign in an amicable and constructive manner, with amiable relations throughout and after.<sup>42</sup> Thailand was also one of the ASEAN countries that was "open" to Kazakhstan's possible future participation in the ARF, despite the moratorium in place on new membership.<sup>43</sup>

For Thailand, Kazakhstan is the most important country in Central Asia due to it being the most developed and largest economy in the region. It is Thailand's largest trading partner in Central Asia. Bilateral trade figures are rising from US\$ 47 million in 2015 to nearly US\$ 93 million in 2018 but experiencing a slight drop to about US\$ 82 million in 2019.<sup>44</sup> According to the then Thai Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya in 2009, Thailand was particularly interested in Kazakhstan's energy resources and in cooperation in tourism, science, and sports to enhance people-to-people relations.<sup>45</sup> Such interest remains today. Indeed, Thailand's major energy company, PTT, had expressed some interest in 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. Moreover, 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.<sup>46</sup> Thailand's major agribusiness conglomerate Charoen Pokphand has also invested US\$ 700,000 in Almaty by opening a subsidiary company that produces pet food which has been quite successful. On the Kazakhstani side, 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.<sup>47</sup>

Kazakhstan's rising importance for Thailand, as for most ASEAN countries, is also due to Kazakhstan's central location in China's BRI as well as its "Nurly Zhol" transport infrastructure development programme which links with the BRI, thereby making Kazakhstan central to the land connection between Asia and Europe. Indeed, the Thai Foreign Ministry's Strategy for Central Asia (2018-2022) emphasises the region's importance as the landbridge connecting Asia and Europe, and aims for Thailand to promote connectivity and play the linking role between Southeast Asia and Central Asia.<sup>48</sup> As mentioned earlier, having seen Viet Nam's success in utilising the transport infrastructure of the BRI to transport its goods, the Thai Embassy in Kazakhstan launched a project in 2019 to explore such a possibility for Thai goods as well. Furthermore, as already mentioned, Thailand is interested in concluding a free trade agreement with the EAEU with the hope of accessing the large EAEU market, in which Kazakhstan is the second largest economy. Indeed, Viet Nam's success in concluding such a free trade agreement has led to a significant increase in its trade with the EAEU countries, including Kazakhstan, becoming by far Kazakhstan's largest trade partner amongst the ASEAN countries (US\$ 554 million in 2017 compared to

Singapore at US\$ 123.8 million, Malaysia at US\$ 123.4 million and Thailand at US\$ 93.3 million).<sup>49</sup>

Socio-cultural ties are another very promising area for Thailand-Kazakhstan relations. 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. Although the number of Thai tourists visiting Kazakhstan is much less and only about one thousand in 2018, this was expected to increase due to Kazakhstan's introduction in September 2019 of a visa-free entry regime for Thai citizens, amongst others.<sup>50</sup> However, the COVID-19 virus pandemic has made travel and tourism near impossible worldwide, affecting the tourism industry in all countries. Despite this, Kazakhstan remains interested in learning from Thailand's expertise as a leader in the tourism and service-based industry, which are areas that Kazakhstan is trying to develop and promote.

To conclude, Kazakhstan and Thailand see importance and potential in one another that has yet to be fully realised. While Thailand might not be the most important ASEAN country for Kazakhstan, it is likely that President Tokayev would try to strengthen relations with Thailand, as part of a broader engagement with ASEAN as a whole, in order to bring greater balance in Kazakhstan's relations and provide some counterweight to increasing Chinese economic influence. Tokayev's proposed visit to Thailand in late 2020 which, if it takes place, would bring much-needed impetus to Thailand-Kazakhstan relations. It would also only be the second time a President of Kazakhstan has visited Thailand after Nazarbayev's visit in July 1993. As a former diplomat and foreign minister, Tokayev has been to Thailand several times and is well familiar with

Thailand. Thailand should therefore take opportunity of Kazakhstan's growing interest in ASEAN and Thailand to strengthen ties not only bilaterally but also between ASEAN and Kazakhstan, and perhaps even Central Asia. Although Thailand is no longer the ASEAN Chair, it is a leading ASEAN member that can help persuade and garner support from other ASEAN countries for the establishment of stronger ties with Kazakhstan, or even Central Asia, by initiating a dialogue mechanism such as the ASEAN+Kazakhstan or C5+ASEAN, as mentioned earlier, in order to explore ways and means to enhance engagement and cooperation in an institutionalised setting. Thailand's central location on mainland Southeast Asia also means that it plays a key role in the Southeast Asian segment of China's BRI and can therefore help connect Southeast Asia with Central Asia, which is actually one goal of the Thai Foreign Ministry's Central Asia Strategy. Thailand is therefore in a unique position to help strengthen both political and economic ties between Kazakhstan and ASEAN. It should take this opportunity when Kazakhstan itself is exploring new opportunities with a wider range of partners, including ASEAN, and ASEAN countries are themselves interested in engaging more with Kazakhstan as the key player in Central Asia.

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