

## **Almaty Faces Provincial Obscurity**

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Analysts speculate that President Nazarbaev is attempting to rein in an old political rival by removing his powerbase in southern Kazakstan

Stripped of its status as capital of Kazakstan in 1997, Almaty now faces a second blow to its bruised self-respect.

Plans are reportedly afoot to move the administrative centre of the surrounding oblast to Taldykorgan - a mouldering provincial town to the north-east.

Government officials say the proposal has been prompted by security concerns but some observers see it as a bid to limit the influence of Almaty oblast governor Zamanbek Nurkadilov who makes no secret of his far-reaching political ambitions.

The idea was first mooted 18 months ago but was apparently shelved in the face of widespread protest. However, a recent visit by Prime Minister Kasymzhomart Tokaev to the Taldykorgan region has added further grist to the rumour mill.

When asked about plans to move the oblast centre from Almaty, Tokaev admitted that such a proposal did exist but refused to express any opinion. "Of course, the president will have the final decision," he told the Ekspress-K newspaper. "Our task is to gather the facts and present them to the leader of our country."

The official reason for the move has been given as "economic and political expansion on the southern borders of Kazakstan".

On the one hand, this reflects growing fears in Astana that the region is open to terrorist attack. Political analyst Nikolai Primortsev commented, "In the framework of an agreement on collective security, Astana has appealed to Moscow for military aid.

"Moscow has acceded to the request - on the condition that the Kazak authorities provide adequate living conditions for the Russian troops from the outset."

Taldykorgan boasts a number of strategic advantages. A Kazak airforce regiment based in the town controls air space over the south-eastern region whilst ex-Soviet military settlements could be used to house Russian soldiers and their families.

On the other hand, the authorities in Astana are alarmed by Chinese territorial ambitions in the Syntszyan-Uigyrsky region. On the second day of his visit to Taldykorgan, Prime Minister Tokaev told journalists that "Peking has serious plans for absorbing this region economically".

He added, "This doesn't mean that China is a potential enemy. That's certainly not the case. We're talking about state security and economic security at the same time."

Askhat Damirov, of the Institute of Russia and China, commented, "Although China and Kazakstan enjoy good relations on an official level, many experts see the Chinese factor as a potential source of pressure on the Kazak leadership.

"Recently, despite Kazakstan's objections, we have seen evidence of China's plans to dam part of the Cherny Irtys River which flows across the border. This says a lot about China's intentions."

Many analysts see the official explanation of the Almaty-Taldykorgan debate as little more than a smoke screen for the government's true motives.

They believe the proposal is aimed at toppling the governor of the Almaty oblast, Zamanbek Nurkadilov, from his hugely influential political stronghold in southern Kazakstan.

Dulat Musataev, political correspondent for Delovoe Obozrenie - Respublika (Business Review - Republic), says, "In the corridors of power, they say with complete confidence that the necessary decision has already been taken. Consequently, rumours that the governor is about to resign and take up an appointment as ambassador to China may actually be true."

Nurkadilov enjoys widespread support in southern Kazakstan where he owns a number of newspapers - including the once popular Vecherny Almaty (Evening Almaty) - and a TV station. He is thought to have business interests in cotton plantations, food-processing factories and alcohol distilleries across the region.

Most analysts agree that Nurkadilov harbours considerable political ambitions.

Amantay Madiev, an analyst at the Centre for Social Research, comments, "Nurkadilov has always had his eye on the president's job and can rely on support from the south. That's why the president removed him from his position as mayor of Almaty."

Nurkadilov first crossed swords with Nazarbaev's regime over plans to transfer the capital from Almaty to Astana in 1997, uniting a number of influential groups which stood to lose out over the move.

After losing his job as Almaty mayor, he staged a political comeback by gaining a seat in the Kazak parliament. Here he carved himself a reputation as a champion of ordinary people's rights, launching blistering attacks on the authorities in Astana.

Nevertheless, Nurkadilov was appointed governor of the Almaty oblast just over a year ago.

Political analyst Andrei Platonov believes he struck a behind-the-scenes deal with the president. "On the one hand, Nazarbaev has no desire to lock horns with the Old Horde - the southern cabal which supports Nurkadilov. At the same time Nurkadilov finds the governor's post far more rewarding than his deputy's seat."

Nazarbaev is understandably wary of entering into open conflict with Nurkadilov -especially after his bitter vendetta against former prime minister Akezhan Kazhegeldin who went on to unite opposition forces from his London exile.

The idea of transferring the oblast centre from Almaty to Taldykorgan represents a more subtle approach. The move would force Nurkadilov to abandon his governor's post and shift his political powerbase.

Amantay Madiyev describes the manoeuvre as "the initiative of a president who has not forgotten about Nurkadilov's ambitions and wants to neutralise him without upsetting the power balance between the tribal groups."

Sensing its possible consequences, Nurkadilov has openly opposed the plan. When it was first mooted in 1999, he asked journalists, "Do you want to live here [in Taldykorgan]? I don't."

His resistance may also stem from more practical considerations. Since the Taldykorgan oblast was abolished in 1997, the town has begun to look the worse for wear. Political analyst Nikolai Primortsev said, "Taldykorgan turned from a flourishing capital into a drab provincial town, losing its industrial potential and about a third of its population."

Following complaints from the Taldykorgan authorities that the town was falling into ruin, Nurkadilov boosted local coffers by 100 million tenge - doubling the town's annual budget.

Local observers saw the gesture as an attempt by the governor to silence local discontent - which had prompted plans for moving the oblast centre in the first place.

Meanwhile, critics say Nurkadilov does little to solve the problems of the Almaty oblast where factories stand still, business is in stagnation and the standard of living is poor.

And it seems unlikely that Almaty itself would suffer from the proposed move - it has already survived once such power shift in 1997 with no negative side effects. Only the bureaucrats are likely to lose out, exiled from the thriving cultural and economic hub of Almaty to the abandoned, dilapidated backwater of Taldykorgan.

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