Kazakhstan Unrest

What is the issue?

The protests that broke out in Kazakhstan on January 2 over a fuel price hike have transformed into the biggest political crisis, the country's leadership has faced in over three decades.

What is the history of formation of Kazakhstan?

- Kazakhstan is one of the five modern Central Asian countries which include Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan
- Kazakhstan broke away from the Soviet Union to become an independent republic in 1991.
- Nursultan Nazarbayev, the country's powerful leader, stepped down as President in 2019.
- But he retained an outsize influence over the government of his cherry-picked successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.
- The capital city was named after Mr. Nazarbayev as **Nur-Sultan** and his statues erected across the country.

What is the reason for the present unrest?

- **Rise in fuel prices**- The protests began in the oil city of Zhanaozen, where at least 16 oil workers protesting against poor working conditions were killed by the police in 2011.
- A sharp and sudden spike in fuel prices triggered a national crisis in Kazakhstan.
- **Inflation**- They have argued that the jump in prices would cause a steep increase in food prices and deepen the income inequality that has plagued the nation for decades.
- Last year, inflation in the country was closing in on 9% year-on-year, the highest it has been in over five years.
- **Demands for democracy-** There has been a growing discontent among Kazakhs over rising income inequality and the lack of democracy.
- The authoritarian government has been widely criticised over the years for violating fundamental freedoms.
    - For instance, during the presidential elections of 2019, there were widespread reports of irregularities.
- Several protests broke out calling for a boycott of the elections, one of the first instances where citizens were openly criticising the government in a country where dissent is rarely tolerated.

How did the government respond to the protests?

- Dozens of protestors and at least eight law enforcement officials were killed during an operation to restore order in the main city, **Almaty.**
- Tokayev declared a two-week state of emergency in Almaty as well as the western Mangistau province, where thousands of protesters have been seen storming government buildings and

clashing with the police officials.
- Internet services were promptly shut off and messaging apps were banned.
- Tokayev said that the interim government would introduce a price cap of 50 tenge (about 8p) a litre on LPG, roughly half the current market price, in Mangistau province.
- He dismissed the Cabinet and the country's prime minister and appointed the country's first deputy prime minister Alikhan Smailov as acting prime minister.
- He replaced Mr. Nazarbayev as the Security Council's chair with himself.
- President Tokayev requested the support of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to assist security personnel in their efforts to restore order in the country.

What is the Collective Security Treaty Organisation?

- When the Cold War came to an end in 1991, the **Warsaw Pact** dissolved.
- In 1992, the heads of Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan signed the **Collective Security Treaty** in Tashkent (Uzbekistan).
- Today it has six members - Armenia**, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan** as Uzbekistan had quit the alliance in 2012.
- In 2007, the CSTO agreed to create a 3,600-strong peacekeeping force and two years later, it established a rapid-reaction force comprising 20,000 elite personnel who are kept on high alert.
- The alliance has also held joint exercises, including a series of high-profile "anti-terrorism" drills in response to the growing chaos in Afghanistan.
- The organisation invoked Article 4 for the first time which is very similar to **NATO's Article 5** which led Tajikistan and Armenia to send their contingents.
- **Article 4 of the CST** talks about **collective defense** which means that an attack against one ally is considered as an attack against all allies.
- So, all other participating States will provide that ally with the necessary assistance, including military, in exercising the right to collective defense in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter.

The principle of collective defence is enshrined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty of NATO.NATO invoked Article 5 for the first time in its history after the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States. It was invoked thereafter in response to the situation in Syria and in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine crisis.

What lies ahead in Kazakhstan?

- Dealing with the protests only through force, including with help from Russia (the Belarus model) would not resolve the underlying issues.
- It is an opportunity for the President to come out of the shadows of the old regime.
- The most sensible one, is to reach out to the angry public, hold consultations and build consensus to enter a new social contract with the people of Kazakhstan.

References

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Quick facts

Warsaw pact

- The Warsaw Pact was a collective defence treaty established by the Soviet Union and 7 other Soviet satellite states- Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania
- Albania withdrew in 1968.
- Formally known as the **Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance**, the Warsaw Pact was created in **1955**, immediately after the accession of West Germany to the Alliance.
- It complemented the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, which was the regional economic organisation set up by the Soviet Union in January 1949 for the communist states of Central and Eastern Europe.
- The **Warsaw Pact** embodied what was referred to as the **Eastern bloc**, while **NATO** and its member countries represented the **Western bloc**.
- NATO and the Warsaw Pact were ideologically opposed and, over time, built up their own defences starting an arms race that lasted throughout the Cold War.

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