



Kazakhstan: From Renouncing Nuclear Weapons to Building Democracy

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Twelve years ago, for the first time since the people came into existence as a single nation some seven centuries ago, the Kazakhs gained their independence. For my people, it was a historic event. The United States played a key role in making the long-cherished dream of the Kazakhs a reality. We will always keep in our collective memory the undeniable fact that it was the U.S. government, represented by President George H. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker, that underwrote, both politically and legally, Kazakhstan's sovereignty. The fact that the United States was the first state to open its embassy in our country is also quite telling.

We began our journey in a new historical era on the rubble of the socialist economy in an atmosphere of political chaos. That period was characterized by runaway inflation; the total lack of basic necessities; a high level of unemployment; the mass exodus of the Russian-speaking population to Russia; the uncertain legal status of state borders with China, Russia, and the states of Central Asia; and an escalation of tension in interethnic relations. Many politicians and pundits were pessimistic about the future of Kazakhstan.

Under those circumstances, the United States provided us with clear guidance in terms of our political and economic development. Kazakhstan set out to liberalize its economy by adopting more than 100 laws that created a new economy free of the old command style of management. Large-scale privatizations, including those of major industrial complexes, were carried out. Kazakhstan began to attract significant foreign investments, primarily from the United States, to its economy's

strategically important sectors, including the oil and gas sectors. Chevron became the first American company to make major investments in the Tenghiz oil field. Along with laying the foundation for a market economy, Kazakhstan initiated the process of political reforms by creating—for the first time in its history—a multiparty system and a two-chamber professional parliament.

Kazakhstan's decision to renounce its nuclear legacy and to accede to the Nonproliferation Treaty was probably the main outcome of its constructive cooperation with the United States during the early years of our independence. During those years, in my capacity as deputy foreign minister, I was directly involved in all negotiations on the status of nuclear forces in the territory of Kazakhstan. I won't deny it: We were in a tough position because support inside Kazakhstan for the impending decision on its denuclearized status was far from unanimous. Quite a number of politicians and public figures lobbied President Nursultan Nazarbayev with appeals and demands not to make that decision and to use all financial and technical resources in order to keep nuclear weapons in Kazakhstan's arsenal as its security safeguard. Certain Arab leaders approached us with proposals to create "the first Muslim bomb."

Yet Kazakhstan is firmly committed to nuclear disarmament and signed the Lisbon Protocol, confirming its nonnuclear status and its accession to the Nonproliferation Treaty. We are grateful to the United States for its support and understanding of that landmark decision, as effectively demonstrated by a special program sponsored by Senators Richard Lugar and Sam Nunn.

Ten years after the proclamation of Kazakhstan's denuclearized status, we paid tribute to these respected American politicians when Nursultan Nazarbayev presented them with our country's highest state awards.

We are grateful to all five permanent members of the UN Security Council for providing their security assurances to Kazakhstan. Those assurances are of great importance to our state, which occupies a vast stretch of land in Eurasia (measuring approximately 1 million square miles). In essence, we are talking about a license to carry out radical economic reforms and to pursue political transformations free from any outside threats.

Yet sometimes we perceive that the international community—Western states primarily—has forgotten or is taking for granted Kazakhstan's decision to give up its nuclear legacy. In any event, certain states that have not yet acceded to the Nonproliferation Treaty or to the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty receive much closer attention from major governments and don't experience any discomfort in international organizations or within the framework of bilateral relations.

Herein lies another serious problem: the lack of an effective mechanism that would impose sanctions at the highest international level against those states that are actually in violation of the nonproliferation regime. A unified and fair approach to the solution of that most pressing issue is also lacking. Some states are punished when there is the mere suspicion that they may possess weapons of mass destruction; others are continuously warned about the harmful nature of such a policy course or censured by means of a unilateral embargo; still others are simply forgiven. Because there are no general rules that address these problems, including those that could be applied within the framework of the United Nations, the international community labors under certain illusions that mislead international public opinion. That trend is especially alarming to us in Kazakhstan, where those who are contesting the decision to give up nuclear

weapons voluntarily and think that doing so has damaged our national security against a backdrop of the active proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in Asia have become more and more vocal.

Kazakhstan is perceived by certain Western politicians and by the media as a state that differs little from its neighbors in Central Asia, whereas even under the Soviet Empire, it stood apart from the Central Asian republics. The unique nature of Kazakhstan's geopolitical situation has become more evident today. We have the world's longest land borders: with Russia (4,350 miles), China (1,050 miles), Uzbekistan (1,240 miles), Kyrgyzstan (745 miles), and Turkmenistan (280 miles). In most cases these used to be administrative borders between constituent republics, which never had any international legal status. For that reason, the legalization of our borders with neighboring countries became our top priority. It is hard to overestimate the importance of that endeavor because the highly dispersed population of Kazakhstan is only 15 million people. It is also important to keep in mind that Kazakhstan is a multiethnic and multiconfessional state: The indigenous people account for only 55 percent of the total population. Thus the legalization of the borders is an additional assurance of Kazakhstan's security. We have been able to carry out the delimitation and demarcation of our border with such a giant as China, agreed to finish the delimitation of the border with Russia in 2004, and completed the legal description of our borders with all Central Asian neighbors.

Our foreign policy priorities are dictated by the geopolitical situation of our country. We have chosen to build friendly, stable, and predictable relations with our neighbors, first with Russia and China. Accordingly, with those two states, as well as with our Central Asian neighbors, we have signed treaties of friendship and cooperation. Being a landlocked country, Kazakhstan is interested in using the territories of Russia and China to transport its goods, including oil and gas, to foreign markets. Because our population is

relatively small our domestic market is not as large as we would want, whereas our financial capacities—thanks to reforms—are quite significant. Thus Kazakhstan needs access to foreign markets to make its investments. Our policy is based on developing regional economic cooperation.

Concerning investments, the role of the United States is undeniable. That country accounts for about 50 percent of some \$22 billion (U.S.) invested in our economy during the last 10 years. In other words, the strong U.S. presence in our economy is a self-evident fact. But our commitment to cooperation with the United States is not driven by dollars and cents: We view our ties with the most powerful state in today's world in a much broader context. Kazakhstan believes that the U.S. long-term presence should not be confined to the economic area alone; it should be diverse and integrated. For that reasons we had no qualms about opening our airspace to U.S. Air Force aircraft involved in counterterrorist operations in Afghanistan. In all our contacts with our foreign partners, including Russian and Chinese diplomats, we keep reiterating that, first, the U.S. military presence is a natural extension of its political and military interests in the Central Asian region and, second, far from threatening Kazakhstan's national security, it serves as an assurance of its strengthening. Our foreign policy concept provides for the protection of America's long-term interests—both political and economic—in our country. It is our consistent policy based on an appropriate interpretation and understanding of Kazakhstan's national interests.

Kazakhstan is firmly committed to the provisions of the Charter on Democratic Partnership with the United States, signed in February 1994. We value that instrument as a legal framework for our cooperation with the United States. There have been five official visits by President Nursultan Nazarbayev to Washington, a fact that says that Kazakhstan, which possesses the largest number of natural resources in Central Asia, is well aware of the strategic importance of its

cooperation with that country and will make every effort to strengthen it in the future.

The West has often criticized us for the slow pace of political reforms, arguing that Kazakhstan, having made great strides in the economic area, is backpedaling when it comes to reforming its political system and is relying on autocratic methods of government. One would have accepted this criticism had Kazakhstan had a long record of independent existence and many years of experience in conducting its affairs in accordance with the principles of democracy and private property. But the truth is that we started the process of building democracy in our country only 10 years ago.

The Kazakh land has never known traditions of Western-style democracy. No wonder the process of building civil society is experiencing certain difficulties. One cannot expect a 10-year-old child to be as wise as a centenarian. Nevertheless, the main accomplishment is that democracy has already taken root in Kazakhstan and cannot be stopped by anyone: Civil society building in our country has become an irreversible process. In fact, Kazakhstan has been staging a risky experiment on the Eurasian continent: Until now, none of our neighbors has dared to carry out such sweeping reforms. In their internal development, certain trends indicate that one will have to wait a long time for such reforms to begin there, especially in the political realm. Let's face it, Kazakhstan runs a risk by assuming the burden of an "engine" of reforms in the Central Asian region. It runs this risk also because it faces such dangers and threats from outside as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, international terrorism, regional extremism, drug trafficking, illegal migration, and trafficking in people. Despite this, our commitment to democratic values is absolutely clear and should not be questioned.

I believe that in all our endeavors involving economic and political reforms we have every right to expect understanding and support from the West. We need good advice and guidance, and we hope for dialogue and an exchange of views.

Lecturing is often counterproductive: Sometimes it results in apathy and disillusionment among those who in practice push to make democratic values a priority in Kazakhstan instead of merely talking about them in an attempt to attract the attention of the Western media.

As a large state of the Eurasian continent, Kazakhstan cannot ignore the problems of Asian security. At the 47th UN General Assembly session in 1992, President Nursultan Nazarbayev proposed undertaking preparatory work in order to convene a Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). To be honest, there was a lot of criticism of that initiative, including negative comments from our old friends and because the total fiasco that resulted from a similar initiative put forward by Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev was still fresh in everybody's memory. Brezhnev's proposal to create a collective security system in Asia failed to win the support of even India, which was very close to the Soviet Union in the 1970s.

But as we moved forward and entered into consultations with experts and meetings at the level of foreign ministers, that skepticism began to disappear because significant progress had been made in preparing key documents. In June 2002 leaders of major Asian states—China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Turkey, Mongolia, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Egypt, Israel, and Palestine—came to Almaty, the former Kazakhstan capital. Representatives of states divided by serious disagreements found it possible to gather in Kazakhstan at one table in order to discuss pressing issues of today, including joint actions against international terrorism. All participants in that summit signed the Almaty Act, which paved the way for the institutionalization of CICA. Experts from the countries involved are currently working on the text of a catalog of confidence-building measures and regulations concerning the CICA Secretariat. Those important documents are expected to be signed in October of this year during a meeting of foreign ministers in Almaty.

The legal status of the Caspian Sea and oil

pipelines represents another important area of our diplomatic efforts. We have always stood for the delimitation of the seabed based on the median line in order to acquire sovereign rights to the exploitation of its subsoil. This issue is all the more important to Kazakhstan because our country possesses the largest hydrocarbon reserves of the seabed. Accordingly, we have emphasized drafting and signing bilateral agreements with Russia, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan. As to the position of Iran, which insists on a "fair" division of the seabed and resources of the Caspian Sea, its approach is unacceptable to us. We have made our position clear to Teheran. At the same time, Kazakhstan is actively involved in the process through which the five littoral states are drafting a convention on the legal status of the Caspian Sea. It is regrettable that the negotiation process is slow and that the prospects for signing the convention are still unclear.

Kazakhstan has been consistently giving priority to the Caspian Pipeline Consortium project. As a result, it has been possible to ensure access for Kazakhstan's oil to Black Sea terminals. It has been a major breakthrough, and Chevron and Mobil of the United States have played an active role in making it happen. When making decisions on the subject of pipelines, we have consulted the U.S. State Department. As a result of such contacts, we have decided to participate in a strategic project—the construction of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline.

Kazakhstan has been closely collaborating with the United States in a joint effort to combat international terrorism. Our security services and law-enforcement agencies regularly share information about extremist organizations in the region. Our country categorically rejects any forms of religious extremism, which has turned into a breeding ground for terrorism.

The main purpose of the first Congress of the World and Traditional Religions, convened in September of 2003 in Astana at the initiative of Kazakhstan, was to promote interreligious dialogue among the leaders of different confessions and to devise an acceptable formula governing

the peaceful interaction of world cultures and religions in order to prevent conflict.

We believe that the international community should pool and increase resources and capacity in order to counter terrorism in a more proactive and effective way. We are talking here not only about special operations but also about the competition of ideas. It's no secret that terrorism is becoming more and more popular in certain regions and countries. Not all terrorists are poor; some are relatively well-to-do. Gradually terror-

ism is turning into something akin to an ideology that conquers the hearts and minds of many people. It is a dangerous trend that has to be dealt with swiftly and resolutely.

About the Author

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