

REGIONAL SECURITY
AND STABILITY:
PERCEPTION AND REALITY



MARCH 4-6, 2007

ROUNDTABLE

(with Policy Recommendations)

ON

THE U.S.-KAZAKHSTAN
RELATIONSHIP

NEW YORK CITY

Our Mission

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy was founded in 1974 by Professor Hans J. Morgenthau and others. It is a nonprofit activist organization dedicated to the resolution of conflicts that threaten U.S. interests. Toward that end, the National Committee identifies, articulates, and helps advance American foreign policy interests from a nonpartisan perspective within the framework of political realism.

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- improving U.S. relations with the developed and developing worlds;
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FOREWORD

In April 2005 the National Committee on American Foreign Policy's (NCAFP's) first Central Asia Project delegation went to Kazakhstan at the invitation of Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On its return, the NCAFP published a report entitled "Stability in Central Asia: Engaging Kazakhstan." It contains an overview of the current state of affairs in that country as perceived by the delegation plus conclusions and policy recommendations. That report was based on high-level meetings in Almaty and Astana, briefings and debriefings in Washington, and consultations with Central Asian experts in both countries as well as among members of the delegation. It reflected our views of the situation and our belief in the necessity to "engage with Kazakhstan," the most advanced and the most promising post-Soviet republic of the "southern belt." The report was positively received both in Washington and in Astana where it was translated into Russian.

In January 2006 the NCAFP, in cooperation with the Dwight D. Eisenhower National Security Series, organized a roundtable conference entitled "Stability and Security in Central Asia: Differing Interests and Perspectives." Presenters discussed the situation in Central Asia as seen from Washington, Astana, Bishkek, Moscow, Beijing, and Ankara. Although the conference dealt with the region as a whole, the bulk of attention was focused on Kazakhstan. A summary of the roundtable with policy recommendations designed to facilitate mutual understanding between the United States and Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan, was subsequently published.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs invited members of the NCAFP's Central Asia Project to return to Almaty and Astana for a second trip from June 24 to July 1, 2006. The four-member delegation consisted of Senior Vice President Donald S. Rice, NCAFP Central Asia Project Director Dr. Michael Rywkin, NCAFP member Steven Chernys, and Dr. Peter Sinnot, director of the Caspian Sea Project at Columbia University. The delegation engaged in briefing sessions with U.S. government officials in Washington, D.C., before the trip and debriefing sessions after the trip.

At a luncheon hosted by the NCAFP in September 2006 in New York with Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister Kassymzhomart Tokaev, the parties discussed how the participants in the NCAFP's Central Asia Project could continue to be effective in informing the foreign policy dialogue between

high-level policymakers in both Kazakhstan and the United States. Ambassador Stapleton Roy expressed the view that there is a significant perception gap in the foreign policy communities in Central Asia, on the one hand, and in the United States, on the other hand, perhaps particularly so on Capitol Hill. He suggested that the United States sponsor a roundtable to include senior-level policymakers from both sides for track II discussions to narrow the perception gap. In subsequent discussions with senior-level officials at the U.S. Department of State, the Department of Defense, the National Security Council, and the Office of the Vice President, as well as senior subcommittee staff members in Congress, we found great interest in such a roundtable. Our Washington interlocutors made a number of specific suggestions, including (1) scheduling the roundtable at our New York City headquarters where attendees from Washington would not be interrupted by routine demands, (2) presenting brief papers and engaging in discussions not necessarily involving all participants, (3) taking breaks and encouraging breakout sessions so that Kazakh and U.S. participants could talk person to person in an atmosphere of confidentiality, (4) having informal dinners designed to promote confidential discussions, and (5) inviting members of the Kazakh and U.S. business communities to discuss economic development opportunities and issues. The Kazakh delegation responded to our proposal with great enthusiasm and agreed that the senior-level officials invited by the NCAFP would attend the roundtable.

The roundtable entitled “Regional Security and Stability: Perception and Reality” was held in New York City on March 4-6, 2007. The participants from Kazakhstan included representatives from the Presidential Administration, the National Security Committee, the Ministry of Defense, and the National Asset Management Company. The U.S. participants included representatives from the Department of State, the Department of Defense, the Office of the Vice President, a former National Security Council official, and academic and business experts. Representatives from both sides expressed their gratitude to members of the NCAFP’s Central Asia Project for giving them the opportunity to participate in in-depth, substantive discussions of topics of great interest and stated that the roundtable exceeded their expectations. The Presidential Administration in Kazakhstan has expressed its interest in continuing the discussion initiated by the roundtable and has invited an NCAFP Central Asia Project delegation to Astana in late June 2007 for a series of meetings with senior members of the Presidential Administration, ministries, and parliamentary officials. A report will be circulated by the NCAFP after the meeting.

The NCAFP expresses its gratitude to the government officials, scholars, businessmen, and policy analysts, both in the United States and Kazakhstan, who took time from their busy schedules to attend the March roundtable. A list is included in the appendix. All conversations were off the record. The NCAFP alone is responsible for the conclusions and policy recommendations presented in this report.

Special gratitude goes to the NCAFP's Central Asia Project Director Dr. Michael Rywkin, who is the author of this report. Without his keen insights into developments in the countries of the region and his deep knowledge of the former Soviet republics, especially their political situations, nationalities, and ethnic relationships, the NCAFP's Central Asia Project could not have developed to its present status, which is fulfilling its potential as a track II vehicle involving the United States, Kazakhstan, and eventually the other countries of Central Asia. I also thank my fellow NCAFP colleagues Donald S. Rice, who headed our delegation to Kazakhstan; Richard R. Howe, who has been active in the project; and Steven Chernys, whose business experience in the region and insights into developments have contributed greatly to the project. They join me in expressing the NCAFP's gratitude to Dr. Peter Sinnott for participating in both trips to Kazakhstan and in the March roundtable and for reporting on his travels to other Central Asian countries.

The NCAFP's Central Asia Project trips to Kazakhstan would not have occurred without the generosity and hospitality of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Perspektiva Foundation. Funding for events in the United States and for travel to and from Kazakhstan during the past three years has been provided primarily by the Dwight D. Eisenhower National Security Series, the Shelby Cullom Davis Foundation, and certain NCAFP trustees, members, and others interested in promoting U.S. interests in Central Asia and U.S.-Kazakhstan relations.

George D. Schwab
President, NCAFP

INTRODUCTION

The March 4-6 roundtable was the fourth forum organized by the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan. In 2005 and 2006, the NCAFP dispatched two fact-finding missions to Kazakhstan, and in 2006 it cosponsored a conference in New York City with the Dwight D. Eisenhower National Security Series. Three booklets have been published: two trip reports with policy recommendations and one report summarizing the Eisenhower National Security Series of conference presentations and discussions. All analyses and comments have been presented without attribution. The two reports were well received in Washington and were translated into Russian in Kazakhstan for internal use. This enumeration, however, does not include several meetings and briefings that were initiated by the NCAFP in New York and Washington, D.C., in order to prepare for and review the series of core meetings.

The aim of the most recent roundtable was to deal with perceptions and misconceptions on the part of officials responsible for geopolitical, defense, and security in the Kazakh capital of Astana, as well as officials who deal with Central Asian affairs in Washington in a setting of confidentiality assured by the NCAFP. The talks were comprehensive in nature. They included finance and trade experts from each side who discussed the state of economic relations between the two countries and economic conditions in the region as well.



Geopolitics

The roundtable devoted to geopolitical issues concentrated on the following: the multivector policy of Kazakhstan based on balancing the interests of the great powers, the role of Russia in the region, Uzbekistan's current predicament, and the lack of cooperation among Central Asian states.

The participants recognized that Kazakhstan's current policy has paid off and that no realistic substitute for it is available. It was agreed that taking into account the interests of the great powers without tilting in favor of any particular one remains Kazakhstan's

best approach to ensure security and progress.

The participants also acknowledged the essential role of Russia in Central Asia. A century and a half of common history, thousands of miles of a long common border stretching from China to Europe, cultural and linguistic influence, established economic ties, the presence of Russian settlers and their descendants in Central Asia and of Central Asian workers in Russia, and shared working and bureaucratic habits speak in favor of close mutual relations. On the other hand, reemerging Russian imperial ambitions, combined with the tendency to treat the Central Asian states as objects, have resulted in the exertion of unwarranted economic pressures and an attitude that encourages the frequent disregard of Central Asian interests. That was the case at the 2005 Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting in Astana, when the presence of U.S. bases in Central Asia was challenged by both Russia and China. Even though transforming the SCO into a politico-military organization directed against U.S. interests was not an objective advantageous to Kazakhstan, Astana managed only to soften the language of the resolution. It was adopted unanimously.

Some participants suggested that Kazakhstan be more assertive in keeping in check Russian and Chinese inroads into the region and in linking the pursuit of political stability to improving political institutions designed to foster stability and cooperation. Stability, it was emphasized, is not incompatible with democratization.

Uzbekistan's current predicament attracted deserved attention. The country, despite being the most populated in Central Asia and the home of most of the region's historical urban centers, has lost its regional leadership to Kazakhstan. Its stability is questionable. Political and economic reform processes have long been frozen. Poverty is widespread, and unemployment is rampant. Tashkent's recent shift from alliance with the United States to friendliness with the Russians failed to bring expected economic results—a move that some Uzbeks already regret. Kazakh President Nazarbayev's overtures designed to achieve closer cooperation among Central Asian states have brought no positive response from Tashkent.

Some roundtable participants complained about U.S. inaction that they attributed to a strategy of waiting for President Karimov to leave office. But that criticism appears to be unjustified given the

most recent U.S. efforts to engage with Tashkent.

Many participants remarked about the absence of regional cooperation that they stated was illustrated in Uzbekistan's disregard of Astana's offer. Discussions centered on the fact that there is no single regional organization capable of bringing together the four Central Asian republics without the presence of a powerful third party that can dominate its activities. (Chinese "soft pressure" was cited.) Kazakhstan has been active in trying to promote regional cooperation free of outside interference, but because of Uzbekistan's reluctance and Turkmenistan's isolation, little progress has been made.

Regarding the problem of Caspian Sea security, it was emphasized that Astana has consistently opposed Russia's call for a unified military command, which would exclude noncoastal states, and has not acquiesced in Russian pressure to bypass the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline by agreeing to ship oil to Baku with the possibility of accepting an underwater trans-Caspian pipeline connecting Baku and Kazakhstan. It was asserted that Moscow now regrets not joining as well, an act that would have given Russia more voice in the matter.

Internal Security

Some participants recalled that initial American security concerns in the area were mostly limited to removing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and barring Islamism and narco-traffic. Whereas Kazakhstan's decision to eliminate nuclear weapons and their means of delivery was crucial in solving the first issue, narco-traffic and inroads by radical Islamists have proved harder to handle in the Central Asian region. Thus the radical fundamentalist ideology of Hizb-ut-Tahrir is said to have succeeded in penetrating southern Kyrgyzstan, while Wahhabis have managed to become influential in selecting imams in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. At the same time, the south-north traffic in narcotics has increased so much that the cost of heroin in Kazakhstan has dropped fivefold since 1996. Closer cooperation with relevant U.S. agencies seems desirable.

Migration and border crossings remain largely uncontrolled. Almost 19 million people crossed Kazakhstan's borders last year (more than its entire population). Illegal immigrants from neighboring Central Asian states are still pouring into the state. (Last year's amnesty of illegal aliens covered 164,000, among them 117,000 from Uzbekistan alone.)

Poverty and unemployment in neighboring states have been cited as threats to Kazakhstan's security. Despite frequent racist incidents, working in Russia is often the only viable solution to the economic predicament of Central Asian laborers and their families. For example, the remittances sent home by Tajik and Kyrgyz workers amount to four times the budgets of their respective countries. The lack of cooperation among Central Asian states (the weakness of commercial exchanges, the absence of common water-management policies, and the fear of Kazakhstan's domination in any regional organization) is cited as one of the causes of the present situation. The roundtable discussion also pointed to a variety of outside factors of questionable value to Central Asian interests. Among them are the monopoly of the Russian media, the uncontrolled arrival of Chinese workers, and the tendency of many Western NGOs in search of financial support at home to oversell their role in the democratization process.

The decision of the U.S. State Department to shift Central Asian affairs from its European to South Asian units evoked mixed reaction. Some expressed hope that "Greater Central Asia," which includes Afghanistan, might turn out to be a focus of interest; others saw this change as a rebuttal of Kazakhstan's aspiration to be designated as a bridge between Europe and Asia. (After all, Astana is seeking the chairmanship of the OSCE beginning in 2009.) Nobody expressed interest in closer ties with Pakistan. It is viewed as a source of Islamist penetration through Central Asia's southern borders.

There was also talk of the "Great Game," a reference to 19th-century Russian-British rivalry in Central Asia, which has been replaced by Russian-American competition, galvanizing China—at least for the time being—to side with Moscow. Some participants pointed to the key interest of Central Asian countries in maintaining a balance among the great powers, strengthening existing alliances, and diversifying export routes in all directions.

Military to Military

Discussion turned to Kazakhstan's ability to maintain a balance among the great powers. Participants discussed the recent agreement between Moscow and Astana dealing with the modernization of Kazakhstan's armed forces. The key justification cited for that move was the fact that the bulk of military equipment in Kazakhstan is Russian made. Shifting to another supplier would

be too costly because it would involve discarding all hardware in use and learning how to use different equipment. Moreover, defense expenditures in Kazakhstan, which account for only 1.2 percent of the budget, do not allow much room for growth. The military hardware inherited from the Soviet Union is getting old, and U.S. assistance covers only a fraction of needed material (example: 34 Humvees of the 1,500 armored vehicles required. The army needs massive modernization in areas such as communication, air systems, and mobile forces. In fact, two brigades need to be completely reequiped. It was concluded that the United States is not about to make that kind of investment (even the armies of the Baltic states–NATO members–have not been modernized). The Kazakhstan Navy has only three ships in the Caspian Sea where poachers and smugglers abound. Nevertheless, Kazakhstan is trying to upgrade its armed forces to meet NATO's standards.

Since the inception of its assistance program in 1993, the United States has focused on bringing Kazakhstan's armed forces closer to NATO's standards by drawing on both U.S. and local financing. This program has involved increasing levels of military-to-military contacts. Many Kazakh officers have learned English. Eighteen have studied in the United States, and a few have attended West Point. Kazakhstan's involvement in another country in another region of the world such as Iraq, where an engineering team of 28 removed 4 million mines, is unprecedented for a country in the Central Asian region. Still, the bulk of Kazakhstan's officer corps has been trained in Russian schools, most are more familiar with Russian methods than with American, and Russian remains the language of the Kazakh military.

Some argued that the United States is encouraging more cooperation in securing the Caspian Sea, as well as improving border security. Russia, on the other hand, prefers that cooperation in the Caspian be limited to coastal states, (thus excluding the United States), as well as improving border security. (Comparing the lengths of Kazakhstan's borders and the numbers of border crossings is instructive.)

The prospect of joint Russian-Chinese-Central Asian military exercises planned for July 2007 was mentioned. Astana wishes to see such exercises directed against terrorism and narco-traffic, rejecting maneuvers that hint at political motivations. Last year's participants in common exercises with China were border forces, not regular

army units.

American willingness to accept the need for Russian military assistance to Kazakhstan seems conditioned on continued cooperation between Washington and Astana in the military domain.

Central Asia and Congress

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the U.S. State Department assigned only one Foreign Service officer to deal with the entire area of Central Asia. The emphasis was on the “peace dividend” that was expected to materialize and benefit the American economy after the end of the cold war. The first Gulf War brought increased attention to Central Asia as a medium-sized, valuable source of energy.

Capitol Hill has a very limited understanding of Central Asia. Whenever matters come to the floor, concerns are expressed through single-issue resolutions pertaining to democratization, civil rights, elections, and reforms—all nonbinding statements. Kazakhstan tends to be better perceived than other “stans,” but Congress remains focused on Iraq and Afghanistan and pays limited attention to Central Asia.

Four issues have led to misunderstandings.

1. Congress sees the trans-Caspian oil route as essential to European security but has no understanding of the delicate geopolitical position of Kazakhstan.
2. Kazakhstan is seen as lacking all of the requirements needed to assume the OSCE presidency in 2009 because of its failure to foster democratization. Its entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) ahead of Russia could enhance its international status to assume such a role.
3. The imposition by Astana of a value-added tax on equipment purchased under the 15-year-old denuclearization program in Kazakhstan is very controversial and unacceptable to the United States. Astana defends it as a tax uniformly applied to purchases involving service and equipment of local origin.
4. The application of the Jackson-Vannick Amendment to Kazakhstan has nothing to do with the long lapsed original issue of Jewish emigration. The use of the amendment in Central

Asia reflects Congress's desire to maintain pressure on governments in the region to promote reforms and democratization.

Whether it is possible to accelerate the processes of reforms and of democratization remain controversial questions. Some participants argued that individual countries must follow their own road, taking into account the state of their levels of development. They stated that democracy cannot take root in lands of hungry and angry people. Furthermore, a middle class is needed to ensure democracy. Democracy, they stated, can emerge only as a result of the economic development progress, which cannot take place when the pace of reforms is too slow.

It was also stated that the executive branch in Washington has to maintain good relations with Congress and work with congressional committees. Some observed that it is important for Kazakhstan to have favorably disposed interlocutors in committees dealing with issues of concern to Astana. There is a Silk Road caucus, as well as Azerbaijani and Armenian caucuses in Congress but no Kazakhstan caucus. Developing contacts between legislators in both countries would be useful.

It was mentioned that except for Germany, European Union countries are not represented in Central Asia, thus ceding the field to NGOs, which do not always reflect official policies.

Business Climate

The fact that Kazakhstan is now a significant foreign investor was widely discussed. Kazakh money has been used to buy companies in Germany, Russia, and elsewhere. Its investors are active not only in Georgia but also in Mongolia, Latvia, and Israel. The government is supposed to facilitate, not lead, economic projects, as in the case of Kazyna, a holding company that participates in 140 investment projects (metallurgy, silicone, transport, logistics) but does not manage them. The Almaty Financial Center is supposed to facilitate Kazakhstan's entry into global competition, including venture capital.

The need to diversify the economy beyond the energy sector was stressed, but some participants warned that the ability to attract capital into that sector does not translate into an ability to obtain foreign capital for other sectors. It was suggested that the next sector

to be developed should be agriculture. Agricultural development could reduce the poverty gap between the urban centers and the countryside. Some participants recommended that Kazakh enterprises be listed on the London stock market. Warnings were sounded about the negative effects on foreign investment of persistent corruption and nepotism.

It was said that the political climate influences the prospective investment climate. Several participants suggested prerequisites to remedy the situation. Among them were prodding the bureaucracy to act impartially in commercial disputes, countering nationalistic feelings against foreign investment, reforming the judiciary, allowing independent media to improve transparency. Again, some participants stressed the urgency to fix the taxation issue, which extends beyond the denuclearization program and blocks foreign investments. The authorities' misuse of environmental legislation and tax laws, which Russia also is pursuing, leads to the renegotiation of existing contracts and pushes foreign investors to insist on contracts governed by Western, not Kazakh or Russian, law. Implicit in those suggestions is the perception that Western firms, which may be tempted to take the risk of entering potentially lucrative Russian markets, are not about to follow the same road in order to gain access to the much smaller Kazakh market.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Roundtable discussions confirmed Kazakhstan's post-Soviet emergence as the most authentic geopolitical partner within the region. In contrast, its four southern neighbors are beset by economic problems and political uncertainty. It is apparent that Kazakhstan is the only state in the region that has the political will and the financial means to act for the common good of the Central Asian states without relying on the great powers. Under President Nazarbayev's leadership, Kazakhstan has skillfully managed its relations with Russia, its most important neighbor and natural strategic partner; with China, its second most important neighbor and an emerging great power; and with the United States, its superpower friend and strategic partner. Kazakhstan's growing relationship with the European Union and NATO will also provide a useful supplement to its multivector approach to international relations and a counterbalance to great power pressure.

Kazakhstan recognizes the importance of regional cooperation and

integration and the need to develop regional architecture, which excludes the great powers, in order to address issues of common concern. So far it has been rebuffed in its efforts, reflecting concerns both that it would become the dominant partner and would be perceived by Russia as antagonistic. Although Kazakhstan is clearly the anchor of stability in the region at the present time, other states have different views about how to maintain long-term stability, including answers to the questions of whether and to what extent long-term stability will be ensured by political reform or threatened by such a process.

The NCAFP generally concurs with current U.S. policy in the region, both from a strategic and a tactical point of view. We think it appropriate that Kazakhstan has received a very high level of U.S. attention. In the United States there is a genuine commitment to a real strategic partnership and an appreciation of Kazakhstan's need to balance its interests with the interests of its other strategic partners in order to preserve its sovereignty and ability to project its power and influence, both economically and politically, in the region. The hope is that Kazakhstan will be able to accomplish what President Nazarbayev has outlined in a number of public statements, that is, that steps will be taken to broaden the economic base and reduce dependency on income from natural resources, reduce corruption, expand the rule of law, develop a middle class, and step up the pace of meaningful political reform.

The specific recommendations listed below support the strategic and tactical objectives of U.S. foreign policy.

1. Help Kazakhstan to maintain its policy of keeping a geopolitical balance among the great powers as it pursues its own national interests and preserves friendly and fruitful relations with all of the parties concerned. It is to be hoped that the newly reshuffled administration in Astana will be searching for the appropriate position to adopt to achieve this aim by listening to all of the parties concerned.
2. Encourage Kazakhstan to strengthen its democratic credentials in the pursuit of long-term stability. In formulating and implementing policy in this area, however, the United States should recognize that internal peace and cohesion among the ethnic, social, and political forces within a newly independent

multiethnic country burdened by a colonial and totalitarian past are sometimes obtained at the cost of controlling the speed of reform and the pace of the democratization process.

3. Encourage greater dialogue among (a) parliamentarians in Kazakhstan and the U.S. legislative branch and their respective staffs and between (b) experts and think tanks on both sides to deepen mutual understanding.
4. Encourage Kazakh investments abroad, especially in fragile countries within the CIS, remove impediments to the continuation of the Nunn-Lugar program in Kazakhstan, and facilitate Western investments outside of extracting sectors by discussing with senior policymakers in Kazakhstan the importance of creating certainty and consistency in tax policy and environmental regulations and assessing the negative impact of *post facto* regulations on foreign investments.
5. Promote U.S. investment in Kazakhstan's agricultural sector. Now may be the opportune time for such investments. Because they enhance economic development in rural areas, agricultural investments also would be desirable from Kazakhstan's point of view.
6. Assist Kazakhstan in its pursuit of Central Asian integration independent of the great powers' agendas, umbrellas, and interference by encouraging the creation of regional organizations uniting the five "stans" without the presence of outside participants.
7. Seize openings/opportunities that will be available in Central Asia during the summer of 2007. Uzbekistan finally seems interested in renewing contacts; post-Turkmenbashi Turkmenistan can still be influenced; Kyrgyzstan remains susceptible to influence; and Tajikistan appears open to closer ties.
8. Enhance interaction and cooperation with Kazakhstan's military and intelligence agencies. This should include increases in military-to-military contacts, IMET funding, participation in Partnership for Peace activities, sales and financing of military equipment (FMS and FMF), and assistance from U.S. drug enforcement professionals in the form of drug interception

analysis, intelligence, and enforcement techniques.

9. Encourage Kazakhstan to pursue WTO admission as promptly as possible and assist it in its efforts to succeed.
10. Consider the extent to which President Putin's decision about the conduct of the forthcoming Russian presidential election will influence succession strategies throughout Central Asia.



APPENDIX

List of Participants

From the NCAFP

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