



The Geopolitical Role of the Main Global Players in Central Asia

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Abstract

An insider's penetrating insights into what's going on in Central Asia together with analyses of the Republic of Kazakhstan's bilateral and multilateral relationships with the countries in the region as well as with the United States.

In the twenty-first century the world entered a new phase of globalization. There in fact remain no states on the map of the world that are not part of this process. At the same time some countries and regions have emerged as new players in the system of international relations. The states of Central Asia stand out among them. During the 16 years of independence the countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have developed into independent sovereign states.

Central Asia occupies a strategically important location, has a vast economic potential (huge market, human and natural resources), and is well placed to become a self-sustained and self-sufficient region. The joint economic capacity of Central Asian states is quite high. The region boasts significant human, natural, and industrial resources. It has a population of about 60 million and a joint GDP of more than \$114 billion. Moreover, Central Asia finds itself at the juncture of Eurasian transportation corridors and possesses a vast transport and communications network.

It is no coincidence that a number of major global players display a heightened interest in

the region. Each of them pursues its own interests in the region. World powers and groups of states are active in developing a strategy of action toward the Central Asian states, as evidenced by the United States "Great Central Asia" concept, the European Union concept of dealing with Central Asia, Russian initiatives for creating a single economic space, the "Dialogue: Central Asia–Japan," and so on.

This is why Kazakhstan considers it important to avoid a situation in which the interests of different players would be opposed to one another's. Instead we are developing our policy in a way that makes it possible to bring all their interests into harmony and to rely on the activities of our global partners to devise a system of relations beneficial to all participants, primarily to the regional countries themselves, as they face the need of addressing concerns common to them all.

We consider it possible to apply effectively the successful experience of bilateral cooperation between Kazakhstan and Russia, China, the United States, and Europe to the entire Central Asian region in the future. Even more so, the positive features that are unique to cooperation with each of these states can be applied to the other areas of interaction. We shall discuss each vector of our cooperation one by one.

Despite the fact that the countries of Central Asia are relatively young states in the modern system of international relations, the history of their peoples and their statehoods goes back hundreds of years. There is nothing

surprising therefore about the fact that our closest neighbors—Russia and China—have traditionally been our historic partners, and it is important to strengthen good-neighborly relations with them.

The region of Central Asia as a crossroads of economic, military, political, ethnocultural, and spiritual links of Eurasia has always been a center of political and business activity for Russia. As the Central Asian countries gained independence and proceeded through the formative stage, the principles governing their relations grew to be based on a more equal footing, that of mutual respect for state sovereignty, territorial integrity, the inviolability of existing borders, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and the nonuse of force or the threat of force.

Relations in the regional organizations that Russia and the states of Central Asia are members of (Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS], Eurasian Economic Community [EurAsEC], and the Collective Security Treaty Organization [CSTO]) are governed by principles pertaining to arrangements of a voluntary nature and equal partnership and independent participation in such arrangements.

Cooperation between Kazakhstan and Russia is based on a vast and solid framework of legal agreements encompassing the development of multifaceted and mutually beneficial relations in all spheres of activity—political, economic, cultural, and security. Such a level of relations is mostly attributable to both countries' mutual interest in pursuing strategic partnership, both bilaterally and multilaterally. Kazakhstan and Russia jointly invest in energy and power projects in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, a decision has been taken to build a Caspian gas pipeline and modernize the existing gas supply system for the transportation of natural gas from Central Asia. The Eurasian Development Bank, established by Kazakhstan and Russia last year, has already begun to finance a number of major

projects in the region. Reflecting the fact that the challenges that Kazakhstan and Russia face are similar, primarily in the economic field, our countries are the main drivers of integration processes within the CIS, as demonstrated by the accord on establishing a customs union. Today Russia's geopolitical attitude toward Central Asian countries has positive dynamics and a great potential for further development.

One should not underestimate the importance of the political and economic influence that China exerts on the Central Asian region. The presence of the Chinese neighbor in Central Asia is a natural factor that has been influencing regional processes in a certain way. We share common concerns of a regional nature with China that are especially relevant, taking into account our geographic proximity. Given this, the geopolitical interests of Beijing in Central Asia focus primarily on the issues of regional security. China is, most certainly, interested in friendly, stable, and predictable neighborly relations with the countries immediately bordering the "troublesome" western regions of the People's Republic of China (PRC), namely, Xinjiang. This vector of the PRC's external policy largely coincides with the interests of the Central Asian countries that attach particular importance to strengthening regional security, taking into account the proximity of "hotbeds of tension" in Afghanistan. At the same time, in this context, our countries assign priority to multilateral cooperation with China, primarily in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Chinese influence on the economic development of the region is another objective factor to reckon with. It is no secret that market availability of goods in Central Asian countries still largely depends on Chinese imports. However, Central Asia is viewed by China not only (and not so much) as a target market for Chinese goods but as a source of energy and raw materials for Chinese industry. This stems from the PRC's growing demand for energy, which it

cannot meet by relying on its own internal resources alone. This factor pushes the Chinese capital to participate actively in the development of the Central Asian regional fuel and energy complex. Chinese companies participate in the development of oil fields and oil-processing projects in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan; Chinese petroleum experts contributed actively to implementing phase one of the Kazakhstan–China oil pipeline, and preparatory work for phase two is under way; accord has been reached on the export of natural gas from Turkmenistan to China and the construction of a Kazakhstan–China gas pipeline.

As is obvious from the projects currently implemented, Chinese oil and gas companies are especially active in the energy market of Kazakhstan, which affects significantly the bilateral economic cooperation structure. In this regard, in order to overcome the existing “tilt” toward oil and gas area in the trade and economic cooperation sphere and trade imbalance, the RK and China singled out cooperation in noncommodity and science-intensive sectors as the main avenue of further economic interaction development. Another promising avenue to pursue is, in our view, cooperation in the area of transport and communication, the expansion of which would make it possible to use to the fullest the transit and transport capacity both of Kazakhstan and other countries of the region.

Among relevant issues of Kazakhstan–China relations I would like to note the problems of illegal labor migration and water resource management in the transboundary river basins, which grab the attention of the public and the parliament of Kazakhstan. Consistent efforts with Chinese partners in this area are under way in the framework of the bilateral Committee on Cooperation and the Joint Commission on Transboundary Rivers Management and Protection.

In general we consider the creation and nurturing of a climate of friendship and mutual trust in our relations with the PRC to be one of the major foreign policy achievements

of sovereign Kazakhstan. China is our strategic partner, and we are enjoying a very diverse and mutually beneficial cooperation and an intensive political dialogue with it.

In general, one can hardly overestimate the part played by our closest neighbors, Russia and China, in the destiny of the region. For centuries these two countries have been actively engaged in geopolitical processes in Central Asia. Therefore, we consider the creation of certain institutional frameworks vitally important for developing predictable and mutually beneficial relations with both states. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is undoubtedly one of such regional arrangements.

Initially the launch of the SCO was driven by the idea of establishing a framework for settling border disputes inherited from the period of confrontation between the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. Later it was decided to rely on the success of the “Shanghai dialogue” in that regard for addressing other regional concerns. SCO member states give priority to issues of security and strengthening peace and stability on the Eurasian continent. Such phenomena as terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism pose a real threat to the peoples of the SCO countries; hence countering the so-called three evils became a major line of action for the Shanghai organization from the moment it was launched.

It is no secret that many analysts and experts in the West consider SCO as a body set up to counter NATO. I would like to stress once again that SCO is not a military bloc or a closed alliance set against anybody else. It is an open organization favoring wide international cooperation, with an option to wider membership. The main goals of SCO include primarily solving common regional problems and developing trade and economic cooperation.

Maximum transparency and the absence of any hidden undertones in Kazakhstan foreign policy are at the basis of our multilateral cooperation with all of the countries of the world. Among them there certainly are global powers

that may become additional drivers of the region's progress. One of such undoubtedly positive world players is the United States of America.

We view the role played by the United States in the Central Asian region primarily through the prism of our bilateral relations. During the last 16 years Kazakhstan and the United States succeeded in bringing their relations to a very high level. Our countries established a strategic partnership, which was sealed by the leaders of both states during the last visit by President N. Nazarbayev to Washington, D.C., in September 2006.

Our cooperation is developing dynamically in all areas, including those of trade and investment, energy, the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), countering terrorism and international crime (including illicit drugs, money laundering, and human trafficking), interactions between our defense agencies, and the promotion of democracy.

Both countries are making every effort to ensure that their bilateral relations grow into a long-term strategic partnership. One may therefore safely say that currently Kazakhstan is the most reliable, predictable, and successful partner of the United States in the region of Central Asia.

The United States was the first to invest in our economy, and American investments were the largest, which in particular allowed Kazakhstan to make an economic leap toward a market economy. Kazakhstan, on its part, has always supported the U.S. policy of promoting security and stability in the world, starting with destroying one of the world's largest WMD arsenals through assistance in the reconstruction of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Therefore, on the basis of our successful and mutually beneficial cooperation, we consider the part played by the United States in our region as positive. Undoubtedly, the U.S. presence in the region in one way or another is a factor in strengthening stability and security. Also, Kazakhstan believes that regardless of

the current situation in relations between the United States and the countries of the region, U.S. interests in the region are of a long-term nature. We believe that the United States has engaged Central Asia seriously and for the long haul, helping to clarify the future of our region and allowing us to determine the goals and tasks that are common for the United States and all of the countries of Central and South Asia and to implement them jointly later on.

We appreciate U.S. support of Kazakhstan in its integration undertakings in the region. Moreover, the United States, on its part, has also been active in advancing integration projects such as the Framework Agreement among Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and the United States concerning the development of trade and investment relations (Trade and Investment Framework Agreement [TIFA]).

President N. Nazarbayev's initiative for establishing a Union of Central Asian States aims at solving tasks common to the states of the region and at developing balanced and mutually beneficial cooperation with our major partners, the United States holding a special place among them.

A review of relations among Kazakhstan, the United States, and the countries of the region would be incomplete without mentioning the Caspian Sea and its energy resources as factors of global geopolitics. It is precisely the presence of immense stocks of carbohydrates that world opinion associates with our region. Consequently, it would have been naïve to disregard the significance of oil and gas, as well as the routes of their supply, in determining the nature of relations among Kazakhstan, Central Asian countries, their neighbors, and the United States.

Based on this understanding, Kazakhstan believes that such issues require a very balanced and well-thought-out approach that takes into consideration primarily the interests of the Caspian countries themselves. In this regard we welcome the proximity of

Kazakhstan's and the U.S. approaches to these issues, with an emphasis on diversifying export routes and, as a consequence, on strengthening global energy security.

Despite the indubitably geopolitical nature of energy resources issues, they are often taken up with an unnecessary element of nervousness. We have to admit that quite often attempts have been made to drive the issues of modern geopolitics back into the obsolete framework of "global confrontation" while artificially presenting them as irresolvable (zero-sum game). Kazakhstan does not accept such an approach and firmly believes that any situation can be resolved in a way satisfactory to all parties. What matters here is that dialogue be maintained and developed.

For example, some media have recently been harping on the same string relating to the destabilizing nature of U.S. policies in the post-Soviet space, having in mind the "color revolutions" in a number of countries there. We consider such views erroneous and call on everybody to take note of the positive experience of relations between Kazakhstan and the United States, with both parties continuously maintaining substantive dialogue on an equal footing, allowing Kazakhstan to advance democratic reforms gradually. Of course, the key to success of such dialogue lies in special mutual trust based on U.S. confidence in the unconditional and irreversible nature of the democratization process in Kazakhstan. The Kazakhstan state policy of democratization is not limited to the particular political reforms, readily apparent to quite a number of political observers. We also pay a lot of attention to nurturing the universal values of democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights in society.

It is a difficult undertaking, given the fact that an overwhelming majority of our citizens were born and grew up in the totalitarian state of the U.S.S.R.

Back at the dawn of our independence President N. Nazarbayev established a

scholarship program for the gifted young men and women wishing to get their education at educational institutions of the United States and Europe. Two years ago this educational program was expanded to accommodate three thousand persons annually, with an overwhelming majority traveling to study in the United States. No single other country of the former Soviet bloc, including Eastern European states, has sent a similarly high percentage of its students to study in the United States.

At present thousands of young citizens of Kazakhstan, having spent a period of intellectual and personal growth in the United States, are back home to pursue successful careers in various spheres. The state, primarily the president, views them as messengers of the very universal values of freedom and democracy that our society is, indeed, aspiring to.

Therefore those who see the role of the United States in the region in a lop-sided manner are seriously wrong. The United States possesses considerable "soft power," and its use in this case is beneficial to all parties. Increased U.S. activity in Central Asia in the area of education and exchanges may have an important medium- and long-term positive effect. Although Kazakhstan is currently capable to carry out such activities on its own, most of our neighbors need a certain support from the United States in this regard.

The European Union has been another reliable partner for Kazakhstan and Central Asian countries practically from the moment of their independence.

At present the EU maintains the strongest relations with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, having signed comprehensive agreements on partnership and cooperation with them. The European Commission's regional bureau has its central office in the capital of Kazakhstan, Astana.

For many years the Central Asian region remained marginalized in European foreign affairs policy. There were a number of reasons, most important—the internal European

processes of establishing the EU as a single entity in the area of external relations.

In 2004, on completion of a major stage of expansion, which brought 10 countries of Central and Eastern Europe into the European Union and for a long time diverted considerable EU resources, the Union leadership started to pay more attention to the implementation of a single European external affairs policy toward other regions of the world, including Central Asia.

At the same time, areas of energy and security moved into the focus of a heightened interest on the part of the EU to our region.

As noted earlier, to a great extent it is the presence of substantial mineral resources, primarily carbohydrates, in Central Asia that largely determines its attractiveness to the outside world, including the European Union. Developing dialogue on energy issues with the region, primarily with Kazakhstan, is therefore of central importance to the EU. Its relevance was brought into focus in particular by the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on Kazakhstan—EU Cooperation in the Field of Energy during the visit of the president of Kazakhstan, N. Nazarbayev, to Brussels in December 2006.

Taking into account the geographical and geopolitical location of Central Asia, that is, its proximity to such notable zones of conflict as Afghanistan, the EU attaches an ever-growing importance to developing cooperation with the region on issues of countering such “new” threats as terrorism, religious extremism, proliferation of WMD, drug trafficking, and illegal migration. Addressing concerns of regional security, including through cooperation with regional organizations—SCO, CICA, CSTO, and EurAsEC—is viewed by the EU as an urgent issue of its policy. Security and stability throughout Eurasian space depends largely on the success of this cooperation, therefore causing both sides to show an interest in it.

Adoption of a long-term comprehensive document called “The EU and Central Asia: Strategy

for a New Partnership” approved at the EU summit on June 22, 2007, in Brussels was yet another proof of Europe’s growing interest in the region. The strategy is to serve as an instrument for strengthening political and economic dialogue between the EU and Central Asian countries at the interregional and bilateral levels and embraces an extended period of time (more than five years).

The main cooperation vectors in the framework of the strategy feature strengthening of democratic institutions and the rule of law, human rights, transport, education, culture, and protection of the environment.

It is by no means fortuitous that the strategy largely focuses on assistance to social and economic development of Central Asian countries, which in its turn will contribute to promoting stability in the region that is a “neighbor of our neighbors” of the European Union.

We welcome the EU intention to promote regional integration by way of eliminating trade barriers and creation of a single market, admission of the regional countries to the WTO, their market-oriented transformation, and increasing their competitiveness.

Focusing on the considerable educational potential of the people of the Central Asian countries, the European Union sets such priorities as provision of assistance to the development of their educational systems, as well as cooperation with the states of the region in the framework of various programs in the area of education, research, and innovation aimed at establishing a “knowledge-based economy.”

Thus Kazakhstan considers the EU role in our region as quite a positive one, however, with a considerable unrealized potential.

There is a consensus among all the global players showing an interest in the region on the need for the Central Asian countries to integrate.

From the moment the Soviet Union collapsed, every Central Asian country followed its own path of political and economic modernization,

causing differences in the ways they have been developing. In our view, this slows down the overall social, economic, and political progress in Central Asia.

Therefore, Kazakhstan sets such priorities for cooperation with the countries of the region as establishment of a functioning free trade zone in the region, adoption of an agreed policy of market reforms; pursuing integration in the area of hydropower and fuel resources, transport, agro-industrial complex; and jointly addressing challenges of international crime, terrorism, and extremism.

Certainly all these goals would not be easy to implement, and countries of the region need support from all of our major partners, Russia and China as well as the United States and the European Union.

There is no alternative to regional cooperation in the long run. Modern realities require increased action aimed at consolidating political and economic capacities of the countries of the region in order to address key challenges and provide security in Central Asia.

Under such conditions it is in the interests of Central Asian countries to embrace a proactive approach and become active players. There is every reason to believe that the logic of events and objective economic factors will provide the states of Central Asia with an impetus toward closer cohesion. First, our geographic location, common history, and cultural and religious proximity demand that we interact. Second, multiple common challenges such as those of joint water resources management as well as economic and environmental problems can only be solved on the basis of bringing our efforts together. Third, the region faces serious risks and threats, for many of which

an adequate response has yet to be found. One may therefore assume that Central Asia would be gradually advancing along the road of transforming into an autonomous geopolitical region. The initiative launched by the head of Kazakhstan on establishing the Union of Central Asian States may be viewed in this context.

The Union of Central Asian States will represent a new format of cooperation based on the effective economic interaction of all parties. The issue of establishing the union has mutual economic interest and voluntary participation as its basis with parties adhering to the principle of equality. Phased implementation of this initiative implies a gradual evolution of a free trade zone arrangement without exemptions and limitations into a customs union and a single economic space. In the long term, on reaching the adequate level of regional integration, it would be possible to introduce a single currency, pursue unified defense and border policy, and establish a joint parliament.

Currently the countries of the region are engaged in interactions across all of the areas of regional life, both bilaterally and in the framework of regional arrangements. Kazakhstan is confident that perhaps in the near future a new alliance of prosperous democratic states will emerge on the map of the world and that the cooperation of its members will benefit the United States, Russia, China, and the European Union.

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