

Kazakhstan: A partner for the U.S. in Eurasia

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When the new U.S. Administration begins its term in January it will face looming foreign policy challenges. The top three are a rising China, truculent Russia, and the radical Islamist threat.

When planning strategies and policies, reliable friends and allies in key geographic areas should be key partners for Washington. When it comes to the three priorities, Kazakhstan, America's partner since its independence 25 years ago, stands out as the reliable U.S. friend in Central Asia, including Afghanistan. The first quarter-century of U.S.-Kazakhstan cooperation were largely successful, and current challenges demand even broader partnership.

Born of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and still needing to develop its democratic institutions further, this Central Eurasian country has accomplished a great deal. Formerly home to the largest Soviet nuclear testing ground in Semipalatinsk and a spaceport in Baikonur, Kazakhstan also hosted a massive GULAG labor camps under Stalin. Dozens of ethnic groups were exiled there. Under Stalin, over 1.5 million of Kazakhs were starved to death in the agricultural "collectivization" of the 1930s – one third of the population.

Yet, despite their tragic history, the Kazakhs have managed to build a modern state, which is likely to play a major role in several 21st century policy priorities: China's Belt and Road initiative (OBOR); Russia's Eurasian Economic Union; and the fight against radicalism and in favor of nuclear non-proliferation.

Home to some of the largest uranium reserves in the world, Kazakhstan – in sharp contrast to North Korea and Iran – promotes the peaceful atom and will host the world's low enriched uranium bank for civilian needs.

Kazakhstan's long-serving president Nursultan Nazarbayev shut down Semipalatinsk even before the country gained independence; and Kazakhstan rid itself of Soviet nuclear weapons and missiles by 1995 assisted by the Nunn-Lugar disarmament program.

Kazakhstan played a prominent role in negotiating the Iran nuclear deal, hosting two rounds of talks. It also attempted to mediate in Syrian peace talks, and is a relentless promoter of non-proliferation.

As the country is punching above its weight in international security and diplomacy, its role has been recognized. It became the first post-Soviet chair of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, launched Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), and this year beat Thailand to join the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member. It joined WTO last year.

In partnership with Western energy companies, including Chevron and Exxon, Kazakhstan has managed to develop some of the largest oil fields on the planet, including Tengiz, Kashagan, and Karachaganak, boosting its per capita income from \$700 in 1994 to a respectable \$13,000 today.

Railroads, road, ports and airports will boost Kazakhstan's role as a key hub in the China-initiated OBOR initiative, which covers more than 60 countries in Asia, Europe and Africa – from Albania and Angola to Uzbekistan. With \$200 billion allocated by China and its Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, the program is projected to attract up to \$3 trillion for infrastructure investment in the next three decades, making Kazakhstan will play a key role in this endeavor.

The capital, Astana, soon to host the 2017 Expo specialized global exhibit with a focus on alternative energy, was built in place of a former Russian steppe fort and a Soviet town Akmolinsk. Today it is a growing hub of government, transportation, communications, business, and culture, with gleaming towers, and a modern airport.

The plan is to transform the futuristic 2017 Expo campus into the Astana International Financial Center in the next couple of years, following the examples of Dubai, Casablanca, and other regional finance hubs. Kazakhstan aspires to become the money center for the Silk Road program.

The next U.S. Administration should expand Kazakhstan's role as its principal partner in Eurasia. On the security front, moderate Muslim majority Kazakhstan can provide deep insights in fighting extremism, supporting the Government of Afghanistan, and in the fight against terrorism. At the same time, it can serve as an important intermediary with Russia, China, Iran, and other problematic actors.

The U.S. should view Kazakhstan as a great business frontier and help it to overcome the "middle income country trap" by transitioning from a commodity producer to a modern industrial and service-oriented economy. Kazakhstan needs to overcome endemic corruption; make the government more transparent; improve laws and regulations; cut red tape; and improve the financial and regulatory architecture of the economy.

As the country develops socially, it needs to make its political system more diverse, and its parliament more authoritative. While human rights organizations criticize Kazakhstan's track record, it is a much more open society than its neighbors are.

The U.S. Congress and non-profits can help.

In the interconnected world of today, the U.S. does not have the option of withdrawing behind the two oceans. We need to remain engaged from the Pamir Mountains to the Caspian Sea. And Kazakhstan is an excellent partner to have in such an engagement.

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