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KAZAKHSTAN AND THE GLOBAL VORTEX

A QUEST FOR PEACE AND SECURITY

Kairat Abdrakhmanov

AFTER gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan began its journey in the world of global policymaking, rapidly taking its first fully-fledged steps in diplomacy, oiling the wheels and cogs of the international system, and ensuring mutual progress and sustainable development.

There are perhaps very few countries that have embraced the winds of change as much as Kazakhstan—a state that emerged from the rubble of the Soviet collapse—proceeding with the required vigor to succeed in international affairs.

A quarter of a century ago, many would have thought it impossible for a state in such a geographical setting to have advanced to where Kazakhstan is today—be it socially, politically, or economically. But from the onset, we set for ourselves incredibly high objectives and have been achieving them with just as much ambition, while learning the

importance of contributing our successes and experiences to the furtherance of international dialogue.

KAZAKHSTAN'S CONTRIBUTION TO GLOBAL DIPLOMACY

We constantly aim to better ourselves—our people and our country—yet we also acknowledge that it is just as important to help improve the world as a whole. Having suffered the grave consequences of nuclear weapons testing on our soil, as well as on the lives and health of our people, Kazakhstan has endeavored to construct a different path for itself—one that it started to follow in the wake of having rightfully established its sovereignty.

This path had been established in accordance with Kazakhstan's vision of peace, security, stability, and cooperation.

Excellent examples of how we embraced this path from the very begin-



Kazakhstan's capital Astana, Eurasia's heartland

Photo: Guiliver Image/Getty Images

ning include the historic decision of President Nursultan Nazarbayev to close the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site—where the Soviet Union conducted more than 450 nuclear tests over several decades—and the sensibility with which the President and the country dealt with the legacy of what was the world's fourth largest nuclear arsenal in 1991.

We immediately renounced our stockpile, after which followed a decade of practical nuclear disarmament. We discarded our nuclear warheads in a manner fully compliant with international regulations—a process we successfully completed three years ahead

of the previously established deadline. Kazakhstan's national vision simply could not see nuclear weapons play a part in the advancement of peace and stability in our region.

Within a decade of our independence, we successfully dismantled the nuclear weapons testing infrastructure at the Semipalatinsk site, and, together with our Central Asian partners, created the Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (CANWFZ) in 2006. This has entrenched a promise that we made alongside our Central Asian neighbors not to manufacture, acquire, test, or possess nuclear weap-

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ons, thus directly deepening mutual trust and stability in the region.

Today we are resolute about disseminating information on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear testing, because we believe that our history gives our voice its value. A significant contribution in this area comes from the ATOM Project, which refers to “Abolish Testing. Our Mission.” This global education and civil action initiative, launched by President Nazarbayev in August 2012, aims to inform the global public about the tragedy of the Kazakh people living near the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site, as well as to shed light on other populations that have been victims of nuclear testing.

Following President Nazarbayev’s speech at the UN General Assembly’s September 2015 General Debate—during which he urged the international community “to make the building of a nuclear-weapon-free world the main goal of humanity in the twenty-first century”—Kazakhstan tabled resolution 70/57 to establish a Universal Declaration for the Achievement of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World. This resolution was supported by a strong majority of UN member states and adopted on December 8th, 2015.

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Kazakhstan’s commitment to diplomacy has enabled it to achieve the peaceful settlement of border demarcation issues. The ensemble of treaties with our five neighboring countries has not only helped to cement peaceful relations

in the region, but also served as a contributing factor towards achieving peace and stability in the heart of Central Asia.

We have been maintaining a high level of such relations, utilizing a multi-vector foreign

policy approach, which has further allowed us to focus on global issues and challenges, while also acknowledging the importance of regional stability.

We have pursued the enhancement of collective security measures through an initiative to convene the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA)—now a forum of 26 nations, including Israel, Iran, Russia, India, China, and Vietnam—and have actively participated in developing regional organizations that benefit the entire region. These include the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Capitalizing on our own unique model of interethnic and interfaith relations,

Kazakhstan launched the Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, an inclusive platform for dialogue that embraces religious leaders and policymakers from around the globe. Since its inception in 2003, Kazakhstan’s capital Astana has hosted five high-profile gatherings of senior clerics from Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Taoism, and other faiths, as well as political leaders from across the world.

During our chairmanship of the OSCE, we successfully hosted the first OSCE summit of heads of state and government in over a decade.

Another important milestone heralding Kazakhstan’s responsible approach to diplomacy was our chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010. During our chairmanship, we successfully hosted the first OSCE summit of heads of state and government in over a decade. Leaders at the summit adopted the OSCE Astana Commemorative Declaration, which reaffirmed support for the organization’s principles of mutual security and stability, and enshrined the indelible nature of security in the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian areas.

Since then, Kazakhstan has also chaired the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), in 2011–2012, and initiated the creation of the Islamic Organization on Food Security within OIC in 2016. Through such institutions,

Kazakhstan promotes efforts at Islamic rapprochement, striving to build better ties and understanding worldwide. In this capacity, we have proven ourselves as both a capable mediator and a stalwart of modern, tolerant Islam.

At an age of just a quarter of a century, many countries are still too young to consider playing a part in the resolution of global security dilemmas. The fundamental needs of

political stability, economic prosperity, and inviolable sovereignty eclipse any international aspirations that countries may have.

Yet, within 25 years of our independence, Kazakhstan proved itself ready to represent the Asia-Pacific region in the UN Security Council. Our election to this esteemed body as a non-permanent member for 2017–2018 has become the pinnacle of Kazakhstan’s accolades in diplomatic achievements since gaining independence. It bears underlining that we are the first country ever to be elected from Central Asia, at a time of growing geostrategic and geo-economic importance of the Asia-Pacific region.

In a fair bid, Kazakhstan was given the privilege of sitting on the Security Council, and in this capacity our

country is today chairing three of its committees—those on Afghanistan and the Taliban; ISIL, Daesh, and Al-Qaeda; and Somalia-Eritrea.

Kazakhstan's election is a clear indication that our accomplishments and experiences are valued by the international community, while signifying the United Nations' appreciation of our diplomatic history.

We believe that Kazakhstan's track record makes it easy to understand why we are deserving of such a privilege, and clarifies why the international community deems us worthy of participating in this reputable and esteemed institution.

Yet we do not see membership in the Security Council solely as a badge of honor; we also see it as an opportunity to contribute to global peace, development, and security, as well as to reaffirm our commitment to voicing Central Asian views, so that the region's concerns can be fairly represented in international dialogue.

Our commitment to countering terrorism and extremism has been further reflected within our foreign policy agenda, and chosen as one of our top priorities during our tenure on the Security Council.

KAZAKHSTAN'S DOMESTIC TRANSFORMATION

Our contribution to regional and global cooperation would not be possible without the transformation of the country from within.

Kazakhstan's emergence from the ruins of the Soviet Union was characterized by a struggling economy and societal concerns about the future. The nation inherited an infrastructure that was not accustomed to the idea of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Yet we were determined to progress as a unified state, setting an ambitious goal to transform our country into one with a thriving economy, complemented by a harmonious society.

There were a number of qualities that the Kazakh people needed in order to overcome political, social, and economic hurdles that stood between where we were then and where we are today. It was essential to ensure harmony among the more than 100 ethnic groups living in Kazakhstan.

Thanks to the careful and effective political leadership of President Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan has been able to maintain domestic peace, and ensure security and stability by promoting a national identity that embraces the best of the Kazakh people's qualities.

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In so doing, we were also privileged to have had a solid base from which we could start encouraging international cooperation and establishing the foundations of Kazakhstan's diplomatic approach.

These domestic successes were a prerequisite for Kazakhstan's accomplishments in the international economic arena, such as our November 2015 accession to the World Trade Organization. Additionally, we founded the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), together with Russia and Belarus—a union that now encompasses five states and a common market of more than 180 million people. The EEU provides its member states with free move-

ment of goods, services, capital, and labor, and is without a doubt a successful regional integration initiative that benefits all of its stakeholders.

Thanks to ongoing economic diplomacy, Kazakhstan has been a favorite destination for foreign investment entering the region, with FDI in our country totaling more than \$260 billion—which makes us the leader among CIS countries in FDI volumes per capita.

Kazakhstan has also transitioned from being a net recipient of aid to becoming a prominent donor. Over the last few years, for instance, Kazakhstan has provided various forms of assistance to UN member states, amounting to more than \$300 million in humanitarian support.

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We acknowledge the dynamism with which the world is changing, and the need to keep pace with scientific, technological, and cultural advancements. President Nazarbayev recently proposed several initiatives that are designed to support this continued development. These include the Third Modernization of Kazakhstan; constitutional reforms that gradually redistribute the balance

of power in our political system; and the modernization of our national identity.

THIRD MODERNIZATION

The first of these—the Third Modernization of Kazakhstan—involves creating a new model of economic growth that will ensure the country's global competitiveness. As we have achieved previous development objectives, this initiative allows us to aim for even further progress, such as joining the

30 most developed countries by 2050. The initiative itself has five priorities, all of which demonstrate our commitment to driving our domestic development, while concurrently valuing the importance of the international community.

As a *first priority*, we aim to accelerate the technological modernization of the economy. This goes beyond the ambition of having a prosperous digital sector by welcoming the incorporation of innovative technologies, such as 3D-printing, artificial intelligence, and mobile banking, into sectors that have not been traditionally suited to technological advancements.

By so doing, we hope to modernize the labor market while significantly increasing productivity and efficiency—through policies that encourage automation and the exchange of relevant data, for example.

Our *second priority* focuses on expanding and improving the country's business environment. This includes decreasing cost types for business, such as the cost of services in energy, transport, and logistics, as well as housing. It also involves a wide privatization campaign, through which we hope to

Alongside Kazakhstan's next stage of modernization, the President has recently announced a series of constitutional reforms aimed at furthering the democratic development of the state.

decrease the share of state involvement in the economy to 15 percent of GDP. In addition, we aim to ensure that small and medium-sized businesses contribute at least 50 percent of the country's GDP by 2050.

The *third priority* is the development of macro-economic stability. Our National Bank, for instance, has been instructed to develop a set of measures to complement the recovery of the banking sector, and we hope to achieve the phased reduction of inflation to between 3 and 4 percent in the medium term.

The *fourth priority* is improving the quality of life, which includes reforms in education and healthcare, as well as increases to existing social security initiatives. Regarding education, we aim to offer free vocational education to all, while balancing the current gap between the standards of urban- and rural-based education. On July 1st, 2017, we introduced a compulsory social health insurance system; increased pensions for 2.1 million retirees; and increased the one-time grant given for a birth.

The *fifth and final priority* is that of institutional change, security, and the fight against corruption. Security is a particu-

larly important frontier when considering the current worldwide threats posed by terrorism, religious extremism, and cybercrime, and we consider it a key facet of cooperation with our allies.

In addition, we have acknowledged the value of implementing best practices in these areas in accordance with OECD recommendations, which we hope highlights our appreciation for the support of the international community.

CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS

Alongside Kazakhstan's next stage of modernization, the President has recently announced a series of constitutional reforms aimed at furthering the democratic development of the state.

These constitutional reforms will transfer a number of functions from the President to the Government and Parliament, in order to facilitate what our President called "a serious redistribution of powers and democratization of the political system as a whole." For example, the important responsibilities of choosing a prime minister and governmental ministers will be bestowed upon Parliament, and the procedure to motion a vote of no confidence on a sitting ministerial cabinet, or a separate government member, will be simplified.

The role of the President will, thus, shift to one that focuses on strategic matters, foreign policy, and national

security, as well as that of a supreme arbiter in relations between the different branches of government.

MODERNIZING IDENTITY

Last but not least on the list of initiatives is the modernization of Kazakhstan's national identity—a necessary feature for the aforementioned large-scale reforms to succeed. President Nazarbayev laid out his vision and principles for this endeavor in an op-ed published earlier this year. It elaborates upon a number of desired attributes for Kazakh citizens, the adoption of which would serve both to mutually benefit our population and the wider international community. The personal qualities of openness, cultural tolerance, and pragmatism are all identified as fundamental for a harmonious society; whereas proficiency in foreign languages, computer literacy, and high standards of education will enable Kazakh citizens to compete in a global economy.

President Nazarbayev specifically stressed the importance of cultural appreciation and emphasized the important role that programs such as *Tugan Zher* (Homeland) have in preserving our heritage and national history.

Internationally, this will also be made easier by programs such as the step-by-step transition of the Kazakh language to the Latin alphabet, breaking down language barriers that may currently

hinder our culture in receiving its due respect and attention around the globe.

FUTURE ROLE IN GLOBAL DIPLOMACY

By ensuring progress and development domestically, Kazakhstan will continue to contribute to global diplomacy, making the world safer, more stable, and more secure.

There are numerous remaining global challenges that demand our immediate attention. Yet, it is important to point out that we have worked tirelessly to contribute to progressive dialogue, as well as to provide assistance and support in reaching diplomatic solutions wherever possible.

A single glance at our involvement in the recent Syrian peace process is enough to prove our commitment to issues in which we believe we have the capacity to work towards achieving peace.

We hosted multiple rounds of Syrian peace talks in Astana, thanks to our reputation as a neutral and capable mediator, as well as an honest broker. At a recent round of talks, we saw another clear example of the results of the Astana Process: an agreement to create four de-escalation zones within Syria—a deal that has been backed by states supportive of both the government and the armed opposition.

We have remained adamant from the onset that the Astana Process is complementary to the Syrian peace talks in Geneva, and we have incessantly praised the crucial role of the United Nations in establishing peace in a conflict that continues to be seen as the greatest humanitarian challenge of the past few decades.

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We continue in the hope that we can collectively put an end to the Syrian civil war, and have made it clear that we are willing to share our path of peace, security, stability, and cooperation with those in need.

Kazakhstan will also continue to transform the world for the better through our work to promote nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. More than a million people in our country were exposed to radioactive fallout during Soviet nuclear testing, with vast swathes of land in Semipalatinsk and surrounding areas still contaminated with radiation.

Since we renounced our inherited stockpile of nuclear weapons, we have constantly called for international nuclear disarmament by encouraging the international community to pursue a nuclear weapons-free world agenda. In August 2016, for example, Kazakhstan organized an international conference

entitled “Building a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World,” which brought together more than 200 international and 800 local participants in commemoration of the UN International Day against Nuclear Tests on August 29th, which corresponded with the 25th anniversary of the closure of the Semipalatinsk test site.

This year, on August 29th, the IAEA Low-Enriched Uranium (LEU) Bank will be officially launched in Kazakhstan. The LEU Bank is an incredibly important initiative, which comes at a time of growing global concern over nuclear security. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, along with the risk that such weapons may fall into the hands of terrorist groups, remains the number one threat to all of our countries and citizens. By enabling nations to develop civilian nuclear power programs without risking the potential spreading of nuclear weapons, the LEU Bank will help make our world a safer place.

In the context of preparations to commemorate the centenary of the end of World War I next year, we come face to face with the perilous fact that war still looms as a grim memory; and we are reminded as to why diplomacy is valued as a constant and a necessity. Within a broader context, nuclear disarmament additionally plays a role in preventing the threat of worldwide war, with President Nazarbayev having expressed his desire to see Kazakhstan playing its role

in preventing military confrontations at regional and global levels in his manifesto: “The World: The 21st Century.”

Another key priority of our diplomacy for the years ahead is regional stability and cooperation. Kazakhstan has made it clear, through channels like the United Nations, that it wants to establish a zone of peace, security, cooperation, and development in Central Asia, and to play its part in bringing peace and stability back to Afghanistan.

Kazakhstan has also embraced China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), recognizing the potential value that it brings for our state, the region, and interconnectedness between Europe and Asia. The accelerated development of Khorgos, an eastern gateway city between Kazakhstan and China that serves as a logistical hub for the future network of transcontinental trade routes that will be created by BRI, is a clear example of the extent to which we value regional cooperation. Not only is it an infrastructural marvel, but it will hopefully provide benefit to the extended region, enabling people, goods, and cultures to flow freely between East and West.

Sustainable development lies at the heart of many of our initiatives. That is why Kazakhstan is hosting the EXPO 2017 International Specialized Exhibition in Astana this summer, the theme of which is “Future Energy.” With the

participation of 115 countries and 22 international organizations, Kazakhstan hopes to draw international attention to renewable energy and smart technologies, particularly with the growing appeal of smart cities in the realms of urban development.

Astana's EXPO infrastructure will continue to be used productively even after the event is concluded. The "Future Energy" International Centre for Green Technology and Investments will be one of the projects created and housed in the EXPO facilities. It is intended to facilitate Kazakhstan's transition toward a green economy, and to ensure that at least 50 percent of energy produced in Kazakhstan comes from alternative sources. The site will also host the Astana International Financial Centre, which is to become the financial hub for Central Asia, the Caucasus, EEU, the Middle East, western China, Mongolia, and Europe. It will operate on the basis of the principles of English common law, enjoy a preferential tax regime, and have an independent financial court at its disposal.

Kazakhstan is also working on the implementation of the Green Bridge Initiative, aimed at encouraging the easier transfer of "green" technologies between countries.

**RESILIENT, TOLERANT,
AND RESPONSIBLE**

Where Kazakhstan stands today is a great testimony to the leadership of President Nazarbayev, who has

ensured that diplomacy plays a central role in forging the path we have taken as a nation.

The scope of aspirations and challenges of our state also speak volumes about the Kazakh people themselves—a population that is resilient, tolerant, and fundamentally appreciative of

the responsibilities that Kazakhstan has taken on in the global arena.

We have long promoted the notion of religious and cultural pluralism worldwide, owing to a long history of living in a culturally heterogeneous society. Kazakhstan will continue to do its best to demonstrate that a Soviet legacy, tolerant Muslim values, and an aspiration for global peace are by no means mutually exclusive.

We knew from the dawn of our independence that we could not afford to be complacent. And this makes us strive for further results, while allowing us to recognize that there is still a lot to achieve as a nation and in cooperation with the international community. ●

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