

# Asserting Statehood: Kazakhstan's Role in International Organizations

Johan Engvall  
Svante E. Cornell

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## Key Abbreviations

ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
CACO	Central Asian Cooperation Organization
CANWFZ	Central Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone
CAREC	Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EEU	Eurasian Economic Union
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
WTO	World Trade Organization

## Executive Summary

In the past two years, Kazakhstan has joined the World Trade Organization, obtained a seat at the Asia-Europe Meeting, signed an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union, announced it would host the EXPO-2017 in Astana, and launched a bid for a rotating seat at the United Nations Security Council. This extraordinary high frequency of international engagements is remarkable, but it represents a difference in degree and not nature in Kazakhstan's diplomatic history. Indeed, since the fall of the Soviet Union Kazakhstan has developed a record of being the most proactive and innovative former Soviet republic in the sphere of international cooperation.

Kazakhstan's international engagement can be understood as forming three categories. A first category constitutes unilateral Kazakh initiatives. A second relates to Kazakhstan's leading role in promoting regional, Eurasian integration. A third is Kazakhstan's efforts to integrate with Western-led international organizations.

Kazakhstan's unilateral initiatives began, logically, in the field of nuclear non-proliferation. Left with a considerable nuclear arsenal in 1991, its decision to forgo the status of nuclear power helped Kazakhstan obtain a platform on the international scene. Since then, Kazakhstan's efforts to play a prominent role in the field of peaceful nuclear technology led to the decision in 2015 to build and host the world's first international low-enriched (LEU) bank in Kazakhstan under the auspices of the IAEA. Also in the early days of independence, Kazakhstan launched the idea of a Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) – a format that has grown to include 26 member countries. Kazakhstan has also been a driving force in civilizational dialogue through convening a Congress of World Religions, and in boosting the cooperation among Turkic-language countries.

In the former Soviet space, Astana has been a leading promoter of Eurasian integration. The perhaps most well-known example is the fact that the concept of a Eurasian Economic Union actually originated as an idea from Kazakhstan rather than Russia. It dates back to the conviction of Kazakhstan's top leadership, during the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, that the positive aspects of Eurasian integration needed to be preserved. But Kazakhstan's efforts originally focused equally, if not more, on Central Asian cooperation and integration. Astana was the driving force behind the Central Asian Cooperation Forum in 1998, and subsequently the Central Asian Cooperation Organization created in 2002. However, due in part to lukewarm support in the region, and to a much greater degree to Russian ambitions to dominate all forms of Eurasian integration, CACO was subsumed under the Russia-led Euro-Asian Economic Community in 2005. While Astana has continued to support Central Asian integration, it also participated in the efforts to build a Eurasian Customs Union in 2010, which later morphed into the Eurasian Economic Union.

Kazakhstan's approach to Eurasian integration has underlined the economic nature of these institutions, and rejected any ambition to turn them into a political union. Kazakhstan's approach seems to rest on the twin assumptions that economics and politics can be strictly divided, and that a union in which one member has overwhelming economic and political power can really be an association of equals. Developments during the past several years have given reason to doubt the feasibility of these assumptions. Indeed, Kazakhstan's leadership has emphasized that Kazakhstan has the right to leave any organization that turns into a political union that potentially infringes upon its national sovereignty. While firmly embedded in Russian-led structures, including the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Kazakhstan has also invested in the emergence of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, China's primary vehicle for influence in the region.

In the international arena, Kazakhstan has accorded considerable energy to its interactions with the OSCE, EU, and NATO. Most notably, and in spite of controversy surrounding its domestic situation, Kazakhstan was elected to chair the



OSCE in 2010, and hosted a summit of the organization for the first time in 11 years. The country's relations with NATO are restrained by its membership in the CSTO; yet Kazakhstan is the only country in Central Asia to have advanced its cooperation with NATO to the level of developing an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) under the PfP, and has sought to make its peacekeeping brigade, Kazbrig, fully consistent with NATO by reaching NATO Evaluation Level 2. Regarding the EU, furthermore, Kazakhstan in 2015 became the first Central Asian country to conclude an Enhanced Cooperation Agreement – an arrangement looser than the Association Agreements the EU has offered Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, but more ambitious than the existing agreement between the EU and Russia.

This is the backdrop against which Kazakhstan launched its bid for a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council for 2017. The campaign is anchored in Kazakhstan's foreign policy concept 2014-2020, where active participation in international organizations is presented as an important tool to protect Kazakhstan's national interests and secure maximum visibility and leverage for its foreign policy in the regional as well as global arena. This objective appears to be perceived as a final confirmation of Kazakhstan's steadfast commitment to playing a constructive role in international affairs.

The distinguishing characteristic of Kazakhstan's external policy in the past decade has been a balanced model with partnerships reaching out as broadly as possible – a strategy that has enabled the Kazakh leadership to build strong economic and political relations with multiple partners to a relatively low cost, and without creating adversaries in international politics.

Kazakhstan's foreign policy in general and its multilateral relations in particular has since the earliest days expressed a clear logic: to establish itself as a reliable and constructive international actor. Astana has been keen to build a role as a respectable member of the international community and a pragmatic partner with all quarters of the globe. The core of that strategy has been to create several foreign policy pillars – Russia, China, the U.S., the EU, Turkey – without prioritizing one too heavily over the other. The key balancing act has been to keep the

house in order by not allowing any pillar to totally outweigh the others. The major challenge in recent years is that the Russian pillar has expanded so heavily that the multi-vector strategy is less balanced than before. It is in this light that the West should understand the recent surge in international activities coming from Astana – from the admission to the WTO and ASEM to campaigns aimed at securing a seat at the UNSC and joining the OECD as well as trying to increase the visibility as a state by organizing global ventures, such as the upcoming Expo 2017. In this perspective, it is in the West's interests to support Kazakhstan's efforts to maintain the balance by further committing to engage with the country. These efforts should, not least, be welcomed in the light of an increasingly polarized and unfavorable geopolitical context.

It must be pointed out that Kazakhstan's ability to maintain a balanced foreign policy and pursuing multiple partnerships are both enabled and constrained by the presence of certain structural conditions. As Alexander Cooley has persuasively shown, multivectorism in Kazakhstan as well as the other Central Asian states was enabled by the emergence of a specific set of external factors connected to three major powers – China, Russia and the U.S. – present in the region during 2001-2011. The first was the U.S.'s decisive emergence in Central Asia after 9/11 and the security partnership it formed with the regional states in the War on Terror. The second factor was China's dramatic economic expansion into the region coupled with Russia's retrenchment. The third and final was what Cooley labels Russia's weak "unite and influence strategy." The resulting multivectorism flourished in the region, and lasted for ten years, during this period enabling not only Kazakhstan, but also the small states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, to take advantage of external powers for enhancing their own interests.<sup>1</sup>

Following the drawdown of U.S. forces from Afghanistan and the region, Russia's annexation of Crimea and its military aggression in the eastern regions of Ukraine as well as the increasing institutionalization of Russia's influence in the region through the EEU, the geopolitical dynamics in the region have altered to

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rulers: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

the extent that maintaining external balances is already becoming a much greater challenge for Central Asia's leaders. While China has indicated an intention to match Russia's effort to a greater engagement with the region, the West has decisively failed to do so.

For Kazakhstan's future external engagements and, indirectly, for its assertion of statehood, the key question is whether the golden era of multivectorism since the turn of the Millennium will continue. A pessimist may fear that the period of multivectorism will come to be seen as representing an interlude only, with Kazakhstan returning to a one-sided reliance on partnership with Russia, which existed in the 1990s and may again be consolidating. An optimist may counter that the present Russian-centric tendencies may themselves be an interlude in Kazakhstan's 25-year long process of emergence on the international scene – an interlude that will revert to the mean, that is, to the continued strengthening of Kazakhstan's sovereignty and statehood.

What should be clear from this inquiry is that Kazakhstan has not abandoned its vision of a multi-vector foreign policy. In fact, it is seeking alternative external partners and avenues more persistently than ever. Yet Kazakhstan cannot do this on its own: its success in maintaining balance – and in the process keeping the heart of Eurasia open – will depend on the existence of partners willing to engage with the region, and reciprocate to Kazakhstan's overtures.

## Introduction

On November 30, the World Trade Organization (WTO) welcomed Kazakhstan as its newest member after a 20-year long negotiation process. A year earlier, Kazakhstan had not only managed to secure a seat at the table of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), but it was also announced that Kazakhstan would host a major international exposition in 2017 – the EXPO 2017 that will take place in the capital Astana. The country is also currently aspiring to membership in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and seeks a non-permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in 2017-2018. This extraordinary, high frequency of international engagements pursued by Kazakhstan's government is not a new or sudden trend, however. Indeed, since the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the sovereign Republic of Kazakhstan on the international arena, the country has developed a track record for being one of the most proactive and innovative former Soviet republic in the sphere of international cooperation. It has been at the forefront of developing new initiatives on some of the most pressing contemporary problems, such as nonproliferation, confidence-building, and civilizational dialogue. In addition, Kazakhstan has been a leading force in bringing together several former Soviet republics into a Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

Twenty-five years ago, no one would have foreseen this level of international activity from a nation still part of the Soviet Union. In comparison to the republics in the Baltic or the Caucasus where independence movements formed in the 1980s, no such popular mobilization took place in Kazakhstan. Nor did the country's political elite raise any demands for independence. Kazakh leader Nursultan Nazarbayev worked diligently to try to maintain a reformed union. This was not to be, and when Kazakhstan declared independence in December 1991, the new state faced enormous challenges, including deciding on "what kind of for-

eign policy would better protect its interests.”<sup>2</sup> President Nazarbayev offered the following analogy regarding the challenge faced: “The newly created post-Soviet reality at the start of the 1990s can best be compared to the domestic scene after the sudden death of a parent. With no time to prepare, the children must begin newly emancipated lives.”<sup>3</sup>

Kazakhstan began its delicate course as an independent state by relying primarily on relations with Russia. This was a natural response to the precarious internal and external situation the country found itself in at the time of independence. In particular, the country's diverse social structure, with a large ethnic Russian population concentrated close to the Russian border in northern Kazakhstan, presented strong limits on the range of foreign policy choices available in the 1990s. Without incurring Russia's displeasure, the Kazakh government nonetheless gradually took decisive steps to exploit the opportunities provided by a changing geopolitical environment, developing a foreign policy aiming at establishing strong relations with multiple external partners. The priority, moreover, was to embed the country's foreign policy in a broad array of international organizations.

The purpose of this paper is to study Kazakhstan's involvement in international organizations since independence. The paper starts out by documenting Kazakhstan's accomplishments in non-proliferation, confidence building, civilizational dialogue, and interaction with the Turkic-speaking world, all of which are areas where Kazakhstan's government has adopted a proactive and inventive approach to significant international processes. The second section focuses on various initiatives aimed at regional integration and cooperation in the Eurasian region, where Kazakhstan has been a constituting member. These range from efforts to promote Central Asian cooperation and security cooperation within the CSTO and SCO, to Eurasian economic integration pursued in tandem with Russia. The paper then turns its attention to Kazakhstan's integration in key interna-

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<sup>2</sup> Kassymzhomart Tokaev, *Meeting the Challenge: Memoirs by Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister* (New York: Global Scholarly Publications, 2004), 127.

<sup>3</sup> Nursultan Nazarbayev, *Epicenter of Peace* (Hollis, NH: Puritan Press, 2001), 9.

tional organizations. This includes Kazakhstan's chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010; its long-sought accession to the WTO in 2015; its inclusion in ASEM; cooperation with the EU, NATO, and international financial institutions; its aspirations to join the OECD; and its potential membership of the UNSC. In so doing, focus is placed on the rationale behind its membership in each organization as well as the steps needed to achieve results. The review of Kazakhstan's place in these organizations is followed by a concluding discussion on Kazakhstan's multilateral engagements in the light of its multi-vector foreign policy. The critical issue addressed is whether the balancing of external relations is sustainable in the changing geopolitical environment affecting Central Asia in the last couple of years.

# Kazakhstan as an Emerging International Player

Emerging as an independent state in the early 1990s, the orientation of Kazakhstan's foreign policy was by no means a given. For instance, it could have taken a passive stance on multilateral cooperation, preferring a cautious bilateral approach. It could also have opted to rely exclusively on Russia, or moved decisively toward the West to protect itself from being squeezed between Russia and China. Protecting sovereignty and consolidating statehood by adopting a more isolationist position could also have been a possibility, as demonstrated in the case of Turkmenistan.

Kazakhstan in fact began its foreign policy course by relying on relations with Moscow, partly out of fear that Moscow would pose a threat to its independence.<sup>4</sup> However, in the shadow of Russia, the Kazakh leadership introduced a number of foreign policy projects that demonstrated that it was not only willing to participate in international cooperation, but also sought an active role as initiator of distinct multilateral projects. As examples, four prominent Kazakh-led initiatives are discussed – nonproliferation, confidence building, civilizational dialogue, and the Turkic Council.

## **Non-proliferation**

For Kazakhstan, nuclear security was probably the most contentious matter that had to be addressed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. During Soviet times, Kazakhstan harbored an enormous Soviet military arsenal, including 1,400 nuclear warheads deployed on 104 silo-based RS-20 missiles and 40 strategic Tu-95 MS bombers with 240 nuclear cruise missiles. At the center of this frightening nuclear complex was the Semipalatinsk testing site in the eastern part of the

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<sup>4</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002).

country. Indeed, the site near the town of Semey (Semipalatinsk in the Soviet era) was the major Soviet location for nuclear testing conducted both above and below ground. In total, the Soviet Union conducted no fewer than 456 nuclear tests at the site. Upon independence, Kazakhstan was site of the world's fourth-largest nuclear arsenal, accounting for considerably more nuclear weapons than France, the United Kingdom, and China combined.<sup>5</sup> What is more, Kazakhstan continues to hold 25 percent of the world's natural uranium.

Thus, independence transformed Kazakhstan overnight into a member of the "nuclear club." This fact alone was sure to make post-Soviet Kazakhstan a focus of international attention, not least from the United States for whom non-proliferation in the post-Soviet region became a key foreign policy priority.<sup>6</sup> The question was how the Kazakh leadership would respond to international calls for nuclear disarmament. The answer was neither simple nor a foregone conclusion. Certain nationalist groups in Kazakhstan saw nuclear weapons as an asset to defend the newly sovereign state against potential Russian and Chinese aggression.<sup>7</sup> The leadership, however, was unequivocally clear that it saw non-nuclear status as the only long-term option for the country. That said, it was nevertheless keen on disarming on favorable terms, and managed to obtain "security assurances in exchange for disarmament."<sup>8</sup> A first significant step was taken on May 22, 1992, when Kazakhstan signed the Lisbon Protocol on nonproliferation and the gradual dismantling and removal of nuclear missile weapons.

In December 1993, the Kazakh parliament decided to accede to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a non-nuclear state. In return, the United States committed to an initial \$85 million in compensation for the value losses. In February 1994, Kazakhstan became a member of the International Atomic Energy

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<sup>5</sup> Nazarbayev, *Epicenter of Peace*, 11, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Ariel Cohen, *Kazakhstan: The Road to Independence. Energy Policy and the Birth of a Nation* (Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute – Silk Road Studies Program, 2008), 30-31.

<sup>7</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, *Central Asia's New States: Independence, Foreign Policy, and Regional Security* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996), 71.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 31.



Agency (IAEA) and, in accordance with the NPT, opened its nuclear sites to IAEA inspections. The IAEA in turn provided support for Kazakhstan's peaceful nuclear energy research. By the spring of 1995, Kazakhstan had removed all of the weapons on its territory, and between 1996 and 1999, all launch pads and universal command points dismantled as part of the Kazakhstan-U.S. program for Joint Reduction of Threat.<sup>9</sup> Kazakhstan's nuclear security mandated a strong relationship with the United States and Russia since the nuclear arsenal was principally dismantled with their assistance. Kazakhstan's cooperation on nuclear disarmament was lauded by the international community and garnered President Nazarbayev international status as a responsible statesman.<sup>10</sup> As recalled by long-serving Minister of Foreign Affairs Kassymzhomart Tokayev:

Other countries and international organizations started to open their embassies and offices in Kazakhstan while President Nazarbayev held a series of meetings and talks with the world leaders. Looking at Kazakhstan, the international community saw a mature and responsible partner they could deal and establish dialogue with on the most pressing issues on the international agenda.<sup>11</sup>

The foreign minister's words were echoed by leading U.S. officials calling Kazakhstan's voluntary renouncing of nuclear weapons capabilities as a "decisive and courageous step" with the country held up as a "model for international disarmament."<sup>12</sup>

Since then, Kazakhstan has continued to promote initiatives in various forums related to nuclear security. It endorsed the Uzbek proposal to make Central Asia a nuclear-weapon-free zone, discussed in the section on Central Asian coopera-

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<sup>9</sup> Nazarbayev, *Epicenter of Peace*, 65.

<sup>10</sup> Olcott, *Central Asia's New States*, 71; Delpine Soulas, "Kazakhstan Hailed for Giving up Nukes; US Officials Cite it as Role Model," *The Washington Times*, December 18, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Tokaev, *Meeting the Challenge*, 130.

<sup>12</sup> "Senator Lugar Urges Continued U.S.-Kazakhstan Nonproliferation Cooperation," *Kazakhstan News Bulletin*, August 13, 2003, <http://prosites-kazakhembus.homestead.com/081803.html>; John Hendren, "High Praise for Disarmed Ally," *Los Angeles Times*, February 26, 2004, <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/feb/26/world/fg-rummy26>.

tion below. Kazakhstan's proposal to adopt a universal declaration on achieving a nuclear-weapon-free world by the UN General Assembly has been endorsed by several other Asian countries.<sup>13</sup> Beyond disarmament, Kazakhstan has sought to play a prominent role in the cooperation on nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. This was most recently exemplified by the decision in 2015 to build and host the world's first international Low Enriched Uranium (LEU) Bank under the auspices of the IAEA. The site of the bank will be the Ulba metallurgical plant, a facility once committed to weapons development but now to be turned into a facility to allow countries to develop peaceful nuclear energy under the NPT.<sup>14</sup>

In sum, the nuclear issue had profound implications for the future development of Kazakhstan's external relations as it quickly drew Kazakhstan into realm of international politics and suggested the value of an active foreign policy involving international agencies as well as external powers.

### **Confidence Building in Asia**

Upon becoming an independent state, Kazakhstan quickly took a bold step to advance its position in Asian affairs. To strengthen security in Asia, President Nazarbayev put forward the idea of a Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) during the 47<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly on October 5, 1992. The vision was to create a body modeled on the OSCE for the Asian continent so as to ensure peace and security in Asia. Unlike other continents, such security structures were lacking in Asia at the time.

However, initial responses to the proposal from other Asian states were lukewarm, with some finding the initiative premature. As recalled by then-Director of the CICA Secretariat Dulat Bakishev, the skeptics "thought that the idea was not workable because of the extreme diversity of the continent and existence of mul-

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<sup>13</sup> Nurbek Almashov, "CICA Summit in Shanghai Focuses on New Goals for Security Forum," *Astana Times*, May 22, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Nursultan Nazarbayev, "A Step Toward a Safer Atom," *Foreign Policy*, September 3, 2015.

multiple flash points with significant conflict potential.”<sup>15</sup> The Kazakh leadership, nonetheless, pushed forward in a persistent, incremental manner that paid dividends. A first meeting in Almaty in 1996 brought together deputy foreign ministers from fifteen countries committed to the new initiative as well as ten observers. Three years later, another diplomatic victory was scored when a first meeting of the CICA Ministers of Foreign Affairs was held in Almaty resulting in the adoption of a Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations between CICA member states. This ministerial meeting turned out to be a rehearsal for the First CICA Summit that took place in Almaty in 2002 – nearly ten years after Nazarbayev had first broached the idea of the initiative. The outcome of the summit was the adoption of the CICA Charter or Almaty Act.<sup>16</sup> There can be little doubt that CICA was a bold initiative, in that an unknown country heretofore linked only to Russia sought to convene Asian countries.

At present, CICA as a multinational forum includes 26 member states, and its activities are based on the principles of sovereignty, non-interference in domestic affairs, as well as economic, social, and cultural cooperation. The overarching purpose is to enhance dialogue and cooperation in order to promote peace, security, and stability in Asia. Given the close links between Asia and the rest of the world, a peaceful Asian continent is further seen as conducive to a peaceful world order. Confidence-building measures are pursued in the spheres of economic cooperation and trade, environmental issues, human security, non-traditional security threats, such as terrorism, organized crime, and border control management, and conventional military-political issues, not least with a view to preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.<sup>17</sup>

After having established the forum and held its chairmanship since its formal inauguration in 2002, Kazakhstan passed the chairmanship to Turkey in 2010.

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<sup>15</sup> Dulat Bakishev, “An International Journal of Non-Aligned Movement (2 May, 2009) Asian Security: A Way Forward,” [http://www.s-cica.kz/page.php?page\\_id=150&lang=1&year=2010&month=1&day=0&parent\\_id=133](http://www.s-cica.kz/page.php?page_id=150&lang=1&year=2010&month=1&day=0&parent_id=133).

<sup>16</sup> Tokaev, *Meeting the Challenge*, 289, 292.

<sup>17</sup> Secretariat of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, [www.s-cica.org/](http://www.s-cica.org/).

Since 2014, chairmanship of CICA has been held by China. In May 2014, China presided over the Fourth CICA Summit in Shanghai. In his keynote address at the summit, Chinese President Xi Jinping laid out his vision for the future of security cooperation in Asia. In so doing, he called for an inclusive holistic approach to Asian security. Although there are always immediate challenges to address, he argued that a preventive approach that can anticipate challenges would be much more effective than fragmented efforts to treat the symptoms of crises already erupted.<sup>18</sup> In his speech, Nazarbayev took this logic a step further by proposing transforming CICA into the Organization for Security and Development in Asia. He argued that in order to tackle the multifaceted security challenges confronting Asia, the organization would build on Oriental traditions and values, thus making it to a certain extent a counterforce to the OSCE; although he did make it clear that such an organization would need to develop a strong partnership with the West.<sup>19</sup> Whether this vision will materialize remains to be seen. Notwithstanding, the Summit produced a declaration “On Enhancing Dialogue, Trust and Coordination for a New Asia of Peace, Stability and Cooperation,” which reiterated the spirit of confidence building first envisioned by Kazakhstan’s leadership more than twenty years ago.

### **The Congress of World Religions**

A third initiative originating in Astana is the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions (more commonly referred to as the Congress of World Religions or “dialogue of civilizations”). The dialogue was launched by President Nazarbayev in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the first summit was organized in Astana in 2003. The justification behind Kazakhstan as the promoter of this dialogue was the country’s historical experience of being a meeting place of different religions and cultures, as well as its multiethnic composition that in-

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<sup>18</sup> “Remarks at the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia. By H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People’s Republic of China.” Shanghai Expo Center, May 21, 2014, [http://www.china.org.cn/world/2014-05/28/content\\_32511846.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/world/2014-05/28/content_32511846.htm).

<sup>19</sup> Almashov, “CICA Summit in Shanghai.”

cludes more than 130 ethnic groups and 17 officially acknowledged religious denominations.

The Congress offers a platform for discussion on inter-confessional and intercultural matters. Particular attention is paid to countering the spread of religious extremism and terrorism. Bringing together religious as well as political leaders and heads of international organizations, the dialogue seeks not only to have policy influence but also, by involving acknowledged religious authorities, to develop a potential to reach youth groups vulnerable to radicalization.

If confidence building is the rationale of CICA, building tolerance is the declared objective of the civilizational dialogue. Kazakhstan has invested a great deal of resources into the initiative, including the building of a special Palace of Peace in Astana as the venue for the Congress. The latest Fifth World Congress took place on June 10-11, 2015, in Astana, bringing together more than 80 delegations representing 40 countries. Among the participants were several heads of international organizations, including UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon and OSCE Secretary General Lamberto Zannier. The dialogue centered on the rise of radical religious groups such as ISIS and Boko Haram, and the threat to international stability posed by regional conflicts. It is difficult not to see Kazakhstan's influence over the agenda as the country faces challenges in both these domains due to the wars in Ukraine and Syria and the potential threat of an increasing number of Kazakhs and other Central Asians joining ISIS.

The Kazakh leadership's desire to present the country as a model of inter-religious accord and a crossroad between civilizations resembles how it has positioned itself in other foreign policy ventures. Namely, it reflects its perception of having the ability to reach out to different audiences in its capacity as a respected international partner with a proven record in working for peaceful, cooperative solutions to pressing global problems.

The effectiveness of this particular initiative, however, merits further scrutiny. First of all, the Congress of World Religions is certainly not the first international dialogue among diverse faiths. Among the flurry of other such initiatives are the Interfaith Encounter Association, United Religious Initiative, World Council of

Churches, World Conference of Religions for Peace, International Humanist and Ethical Union, Interreligious and International Federation for World Peace, among many others. In this context, the question is whether yet another such interfaith dialogue brings any added value. Moreover, there is the issue of whether Kazakhstan can legitimately establish itself as an exemplar in interfaith relations.

Although the Kazakh government has been keen to emphasize its intentions in the field of inter-confessional tolerance, Kazakhstan itself has been subjected to criticism on the issue of freedom of religion. Indeed, there has been controversy surrounding the 2011 Law on Religion, which drastically curbed the number of officially recognized religious faiths from 45 to 17. International organizations and human rights groups were particularly concerned with the new legislation. The OSCE, for one, noted that: "The new law appears to unnecessarily restrict the freedom of religion or belief."<sup>20</sup> The U.S.-based watchdog Freedom House even labeled the new legislative provisions "repressive" as "they grossly curb Kazakhstani citizens' right to freely practice and express their faith."<sup>21</sup> Kazakh government representatives have defended the stricter rules on the grounds of counteracting the use of religion for destructive and extremist purposes.<sup>22</sup> The harsher policies toward certain religious groups do, however, suggest a certain imbalance between Kazakhstan's actual domestic record and the international posture on the matters. This naturally raises the question of whether the dialogue is intended as a venue for identifying and resolving interfaith tensions, or merely an initiative for celebrating Kazakhstan's intentions to the outside world.

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<sup>20</sup> "OSCE Human Rights Chief Expresses Concern over Restrictions in Kazakhstan's New Religion Law," OSCE Press Release, September 29, 2011, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/83191>.

<sup>21</sup> Freedom House, "Proposed Religion Law in Kazakhstan Violates Religious Freedom," September 22, 2011, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/proposed-religion-law-kazakhstan-violates-religious-freedom>.

<sup>22</sup> Merey Kabiden, "Foreign Ministry Holds Briefing for Diplomats on Religious Freedom in Country," *Astana Times*, March 7, 2014, <http://astanatimes.com/2014/03/foreign-ministry-holds-briefing-diplomats-religious-freedom-country/>.

It also points to divergent perceptions in the region and in the West on such issues. Indeed, Kazakhstan and its neighbors (such as Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan) proudly promote their ability to maintain inter-religious harmony, and advance the strict secular nature of state institutions, coupled with restrictive measures against alien and radical religious forces, as an example to follow. There used to be support in the West for such strict secularism intended to protect the state and society from religious interference, particularly in the Turkish context, as such secularism is based on the French notion of *laïcité*. But lately, Western governments and NGOs have tended to view such efforts as repressive in nature, and instead promoted an Anglo-Saxon form of secularism based on the principle of individual religious freedoms. It remains to be seen whether the ongoing debates on handling radicalism in Europe will lead to greater understanding for the Kazakh perceptions on this issue.

### **The Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States**

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, five independent Turkic-speaking states emerged on the international arena – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan in Central Asia, as well as Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus. To strengthen its ties with the newly independent states, Turkey quickly offered foreign aid and scholarships for students. Starting as early as 1992, several summits were held with the participation of the countries' heads of state, and several bilateral agreements were concluded between Turkey and the new republics. Despite the noticeable increase in cooperation, it was not until October 2009 that an institutionalized form of multilateral cooperation came into being. At the Ninth Summit of the Presidents of the Turkic-Speaking States, four countries (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkey) signed the Nakhchivan Agreement on the establishment of the Cooperation Council of the Turkic-Speaking States (the Turkic Council). In line with their general reluctance to participate in multilateral initiatives, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan opted not to join, although representatives from Turkmenistan have participated in recent summits as observers. With the overarching goal of promoting comprehensive cooperation among the member states in the political, economic, and cultural

fields, the Council is designed as an umbrella organization for affiliated organizations including the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY), the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic Speaking Countries (TURKPA), the Turkic Business Council, Turkic Academy, and the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation.<sup>23</sup>

As acknowledged from within the organization, the idea of establishing the Turkic Council is unanimously credited to Nazarbayev. The attention Nazarbayev has devoted to cooperation among the Turkic-speaking nations is also evident from the fact that he is the only head of state to have participated in all summits since 1992. Accordingly, the Turkic vector is evidently “viewed as an important dimension diversifying Kazakhstan’s foreign policy ‘basket’ and opening up additional room for maneuver.”<sup>24</sup> It may be somewhat surprising that Kazakhstan has taken the lead on this issue, given that the original impetus for Turkic cooperation came from Turkey. However, the Turkish government under the AKP has relegated Turkic cooperation to a secondary priority in comparison to its efforts to focus on a leadership role in the Middle East and the Islamic world more broadly, thus opening up space for Kazakhstan to take the initiative.

Cooperation within the Turkic Council is mostly restricted to “softer issues” in the cultural domain. In the past decade, Turkey has managed to develop a network of secondary schools and higher educational institutions in Central Asia. In addition, Turkey’s economic presence has also increased significantly since the 1990s, although it cannot be compared to that of China or Russia. In recent times, a major topic of concern for the Turkic Council has been to initiate multilateral cooperation in tourism. Indeed, the Kazakh foreign minister, Erlan Idrissof, even identified tourism as the Council’s key priority, and member states have commit-

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<sup>23</sup> Nurzhanat Ametbek, “Turkic Council 5<sup>th</sup> Leaders’ Summit was held in Astana: Desire for a better Turkic Diaspora,” *Turkish Weekly*, September 14, 2015, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/2015/09/14/news/turkic-council-5th-leaders-summit-was-held-in-astana-desire-for-a-better-turkic-diaspora/>.

<sup>24</sup> Alim Bayaliev, “The Turkic Council: Will the Turks Finally Unite?” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, February 19, 2014, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12916-the-turkic-council-will-the-turks-finally-unite?.html>.



ted to realizing what is labeled the Turkic Council Modern Silk Road Joint Tour Package. Cooperation in the sphere of media and information has also been emphasized at recent summits. At the 2014 summit, for example, Nazarbayev raised the issue of "creating a special satellite channel that will show to the whole world Turkic-speaking countries, our culture and history."<sup>25</sup> As a testimony to some progress in this sphere, the most recent Fifth Leaders' Summit in Astana on September 10-11, 2015, also resulted in a tangible outcome in the form of a signed Joint Cooperation Protocol on Media and Information.

Turkic cooperation was born out of the vision of a future confederation in the early 1990s. Since then, such dreams have faded and been replaced with more realistic and limited notions of cooperation, which today appear comparable to those of the Nordic Council in Europe. Indeed, whereas there is considerable cooperation among the Nordic countries, the Council has in fact been superseded by the EU as regards close political cooperation. Nonetheless, it still fulfills an important function for members, which will likely be true of Turkic cooperation too.

## Summary

Since independence, Kazakhstan has made use of some of its domestic characteristics and applied these in concrete foreign policy initiatives. Its delicate position as a nuclear power following the dissolution of the Soviet Union was resolved by quick and firm commitment to disarmament and ongoing work for a nuclear-free-world. Its national characteristics, which include a blend of Turkic past and present, moderate Islam and multiculturalism, and a peaceful transition from Soviet rule, have further been utilized in distinct multilateral initiatives, such as cooperation among Turkic-speaking states, civilizational dialogue, and confidence building for the purpose of peace and security. The following major initiatives illustrate Kazakhstan's willingness to initiate multilateral practices:

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<sup>25</sup> "Turkic-Speaking States Summit Focuses on Tourism," *The Astana Times*, June 6, 2014, <http://astanatimes.com/2014/06/turkic-speaking-states-summit-focuses-tourism/>.

- Kazakhstan closed the Semipalatinsk nuclear testing site by presidential decree in 1991. At a time of immense nuclear insecurity following the fall of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan's decision laid the foundation for elevating its status as a responsible independent state striving to contribute to global nuclear disarmament.
- In the same field, through a number of decisions Kazakhstan gave up what was the world's fourth-largest nuclear arsenal. The state acceded to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.
- Following the acceptance of Kazakhstan into the United Nations, President Nazarbayev used his first speech at the General Assembly to put forward the vision of a Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). The initiative later gathered the support of the international community as codified in the documents of the CICA summit in Almaty in June 2002. Three more summits have since been held, solidifying the conference's function as an integral part of discussions on Asian security.
- In the midst of the international war against terrorism in an era of religious extremism, Kazakhstan launched inter-religious dialogue as a platform aimed at promoting a culture of religious, cultural, and civilizational tolerance in the world. Five World Congresses have taken place in Astana since the inaugural event in 2003. Kazakhstan has framed this initiative as building on its own experience of multi-ethnic and multi-confessional harmony.
- Kazakhstan has been the prime driver in bringing together Turkey and several post-Soviet Turkic-speaking states under the multilateral umbrella of the Turkic Council.

## Eurasian Integration

President Nazarbayev was perhaps the Soviet republican leader who most fiercely resisted the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Having ascended to the post of Communist Party leader of the Kazakh SSR in 1989, the following year Nazarbayev won elections to the newly established post of President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. He had strongly supported Mikhail Gorbachev's efforts to maintain a reformed Soviet Union. But when it became obvious that it was doomed, Kazakhstan became the last republic to declare independence on December 16, 1991. Initially, the Kazakh leader attempted to preserve the trade, political, and military connections it had developed as part of the Soviet Union. In particular, Nazarbayev supported the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as a counterweight to the sudden disintegration of the Soviet Union, and it was no coincidence that its founding document, the Almaty Declaration, was signed in Kazakhstan's then-capital Almaty.

At the time of independence, Kazakhstan confronted a demographic situation that was highly challenging even in comparison with other post-Soviet countries; ethnic Kazakhs constituted only 40 percent of the total population in the republic, with ethnic Russians making up an almost equal number with 38 percent.<sup>26</sup> In spite of this, the ethnic balance was stacked in favor of the titular nations of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan. Research from the Soviet period shows that Slavs were leaving Central Asia at a faster rate than they were entering in the last decades of the Soviet Union's existence. According to Rywkin, "During the years of the Eleventh Five-year Plan in the early 1980s, 400,000 people, overwhelmingly Europeans [Slavs], left Kazakh villages for other republics, creating a negative

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<sup>26</sup> Twenty-five years later, the ethnic make-up has changed considerably following the emigration of ethnic Russians. Kazakhs now represent 63 percent of the population while the percentage of Russians has declined to 23 percent.

migration balance for the republic as a whole.”<sup>27</sup> There was virtually no out-migration of Muslims from Central Asia to other republics, and, additionally, the birth rate of the Central Asian nationalities was much greater than that of Slavs.

Nevertheless, the divided social structure was a real source of concern for the nation’s government. Upon independence, some experts warned that conflict could erupt along ethnic lines, including the possibility of Russia claiming parts of northern Kazakhstan. Such predictions were partly informed in the context of Almaty having been one of the first “trouble spots” of the perestroika era. In December 1986, a major anti-Soviet uprising broke out in Almaty. Demonstrations erupted following protests against Gorbachev’s decision to appoint an ethnic Russian to the post of First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan. Angry crowds gathered in downtown Almaty, and protesters clashed with law enforcement agencies. The unrest demonstrated the potential of ethnicity as a mobilizing factor in Kazakhstan.

Comprising a vast but sparsely populated territory and sharing a 7,000 kilometer-long border with Russia to the north, Kazakhstan’s state- and nation-building has thus been carefully undertaken in order to maintain inter-ethnic harmony and not provoke tensions with Russia. A symbol of this was the relocation of the national capital in 1997 from the southeastern city of Almaty to Astana located in the center-north of the country.

Against this backdrop, Kazakhstan’s strong involvement in setting up the CIS in December 1991 stemmed from Nazarbayev’s strong insistence that it was necessary to maintain economic and security links between the former Soviet republics. Although the CIS was not originally intended for re-integrative purposes, but rather as a framework for managing the disintegration of the Soviet Union in an orderly manner, the focus soon turned to economically integrating the newly independent states. Yet, this multilateral project never really took off, with most independent states unwilling to give up their newly won sovereignty, instead preferring to cooperate bilaterally. According to Tokayev, several factors ham-

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Rywkin, *Moscow’s Muslim Challenge: Soviet Central Asia* (Armonk: M E. Sharpe, 1990), 81.

pered the CIS, including fears of Russian domination, unrealistic initial expectations, an obsolete institutional design, and a politicization of the organization at the expense of economic issues.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, even though Kazakhstan strongly supported integration within the CIS, it insisted on cooperation based on equal terms, not Russian supremacy.<sup>29</sup>

### **Kazakhstan and Central Asian Cooperation**

With a territory twice the size of the other four post-Soviet Central Asian states combined, and with the strongest economy in the region, Kazakhstan has been the driving force in efforts to establish cooperation among the regional states. However, this has proved to be an arduous task. Despite sharing a common political and economic history as well as centuries-old geographical, economic, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic ties, it is also true that the five Central Asian states have increasingly grown apart over the past quarter of a century. Their domestic political and economic developments are increasingly distinct from one another, and their foreign policies have followed different trajectories. They have held very different opinions regarding Eurasian integration as well as engagement with major international organizations. Some sub-regional linkages are also stronger than others. It can be argued, for example, that Kazakhstan's northern and western regions are more oriented towards Russia and China than towards Central Asian neighbors.

In strengthening ties with its neighbors, a particularly delicate matter for the Kazakhstani leadership has been the strained relationship with Uzbekistan – the most populous country in the region. A certain historically rooted rivalry over the leadership position in the region has been evident since independence, and, as outlined in former Foreign Minister Tokayev's memoirs, this historical background has had an impact on the relations between the two in the post-Soviet geopolitical context.<sup>30</sup> Although Uzbekistan in the mid-1990s sought a role as a

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<sup>28</sup> Tokaev, *Meeting the Challenge*, 306-307.

<sup>29</sup> Olcott, *Unfulfilled Promise*, 19.

<sup>30</sup> Tokaev, *Meeting the Challenge*, 178.

regional power,<sup>31</sup> Kazakhstan's growing economic power has meant that the power balance in the region has shifted decisively northwards. Over time, Uzbekistan's government has also become increasingly hostile toward regional integration initiatives.

It is common today to stress the bad relations among Central Asian states and leaders, but it was not always thus. Admittedly, at the time of independence, the Central Asian states found themselves largely preoccupied with adjusting to the new domestic political and economic situation, including severe economic hardship. However, discussions on Central Asian integration *did* take place in the 1990s. In 1994, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan signed a treaty creating a common economic space between the two countries, which Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan later also joined. The cooperation agreement between the countries was named the Central Asia Economic Forum in 1998. Four years later, in 2002, the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) was officially created with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as members.<sup>32</sup> The intention was to promote economic cooperation as well as coordinate foreign policy. CACO's Secretary General, the Kazakh diplomat Serik Primbetov, strongly argued that forming a Central Asian economic bloc would allow the countries to truly integrate into the world economy as more than producers of raw materials.<sup>33</sup> However, tangible results remained elusive, and by 2005 CACO had effectively ceased to exist, absorbed as it was by the geographically wider Euro-Asian Economic Community (EurAsEC) dominated by Russia. In 2007, Nazarbayev made a last attempt to re-

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<sup>31</sup> Svante E. Cornell, "Uzbekistan: A Regional Player in Eurasian Geopolitics," *European Security* 9, no. 2 (2000): 115-140.

<sup>32</sup> Mirzokhid Rakhimov, "Internal and External Dynamics of Regional Cooperation in Central Asia," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 1 (2010): 95-101, 96-97.

<sup>33</sup> Serik Primbetov, "Central Asia: Prospects for Regional Integration," in *Economic Transition in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, edited by Bartłomiej Kaminski (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 167.

vive Central Asian economic integration within the framework of a new union, only to see the proposal rejected by Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.<sup>34</sup>

The cooperation initiative in the region that has yielded the most concrete results is probably the Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program, which is jointly financed by six international organizations.<sup>35</sup> In addition to the five post-Soviet Central Asian states, the project also includes Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, Mongolia, and Pakistan. Although involving multiple organizations, the main financiers are the ADB and China. Launched in 1997, CAREC has so far funded 136 projects worth approximately \$21 billion, most of which are related to transport, energy, and trade.<sup>36</sup> The major role of CAREC is to finance infrastructural projects, and it has made definite progress in constructing and renovating roads and railways. At the same time, efforts to improve less tangible aspects, such as customs systems and legal frameworks to facilitate the effectiveness of the infrastructural linkages, have largely failed to materialize, with bureaucratic hurdles and corruption remaining frequent obstacles to regional transport systems and economic connectivity.

Besides the attempts to accomplish broader Central Asian cooperation agreements, the Central Asian countries have managed to unite around some more narrowly defined projects of mutual interest. The first intraregional project set up in Central Asia was the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), which was established already in 1993 to cooperate on the protection and control of

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<sup>34</sup> Marlene Laruelle and Sebastien Peyrouse, "Regional Organisations in Central Asia: Patterns of Interaction, Dilemmas of Efficiency," University of Central Asia, Working Paper No. 10, 2012, 5-6.

<sup>35</sup> These are the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and the World Bank.

<sup>36</sup> \$7.5 billion has been financed by the ADB, \$4.5 billion by regional governments themselves, and \$9.4 billion by the EBRD, UNDP, WB, IMF, and IDB. See S. Frederick Starr, Svante E. Cornell, Nicklas Norling, "The EU, Central Asia, and the Development of Continental Transport and Trade," *Silk Road Paper* (Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute – Silk Road Studies Program, December 2015), 29-30.

transboundary water issues.<sup>37</sup> A second regional arrangement was the creation of the Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (CANWFZ). Initially proposed by Uzbekistan, it was signed by all the five heads of state at a meeting in Kazakhstan in 2006 and ratified in 2009. In this agreement, the Central Asian states committed themselves to refrain from producing, acquiring, testing, stocking, or possessing nuclear arms.<sup>38</sup> CANWFZ was a subtle means of demonstrating that Central Asian states have a full right, as sovereign entities, to undertake initiatives of their own, without outside powers. As a confirmation, representatives of the “nuclear five” – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States signed the Protocol to the CANWFZ treaty in New York on May 6, 2014. The Protocol provides legally binding assurances not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against the five Central Asian states.

Overall, understandings of regional integration and foreign policy objectives among the regional states are often unfavorable for collective arrangements and, at times, even diametrically opposed to meaningful cooperation.<sup>39</sup> Illustrative of this Turkmenistan’s adoption of an internationally recognized policy of permanent neutrality, thus avoiding any multilateral cooperation. Within the region, the relationship between Uzbekistan and its two smaller neighbors Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is tense. While this is particularly in regard to water management issues, Tashkent also perceives these two countries as allowing Russia too great a role in their domestic affairs, with detrimental effects for Uzbekistan’s national interests. Moreover, even the relationship between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has been increasingly fraught due to frequent outbreaks of violence along the poorly demarcated Kyrgyz-Tajik border. To conclude, the prospects for Central Asian integration look less optimistic today than a decade ago. To a significant extent, the reasons are found in the different positions that they have taken on the role of Russia in the region’s economy and security, which will be discussed next.

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<sup>37</sup> UNDP, *Central Asia Human Development Report* (Bratislava: UNDP, 2005), 103.

<sup>38</sup> “Central Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone (CANWFZ),” *NTI*, September 28, 2015, <http://www.nti.org/treaties-and-regimes/central-asia-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-canwz/>.

<sup>39</sup> Laruelle and Peyrouse, “Regional Organisations in Central Asia,” 31.



## **Eurasian Economic Union**

Since independence, Kazakhstan has been intimately connected to discussion on economic integration in the post-Soviet region. As far back as 1994, President Nazarbayev was the first post-Soviet leader to propose the creation of a Eurasian Union of states that would facilitate joint efforts toward economic reforms as well as harmonization of national legislation in the region. Severe economic crisis in the region as well as preoccupation with other domestic issues meant that the idea failed to gain traction in the 1990s. In October 2000, however, Kazakhstan together with Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan founded EurAsEC as a substitute to the CIS's inability to make progress in the areas of economic integration and establishing a customs union. EurAsEC was an early attempt to coordinate the economic and trade policies by reducing custom tariffs, taxes, and other hurdles to economic exchange in the post-Soviet territories. Seven years later, at the October 2007 EurAsEC meeting, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Belarus agreed to push integration further by establishing a Customs Union. Prior to this, during an official visit to Moscow in March 2007, Nazarbayev had said: "I believe a certain group of countries are ripe for taking the road Europe has been following [in the past 50 years]. We certainly have such capabilities."<sup>40</sup>

Nazarbayev's support for the creation of an economically integrated post-Soviet space has arguably been the most consistent in the region. His thinking was laid out in an article published on October 25, 2011, in which he argued that the Eurasian Union should rest on four basic principles: 1) economic pragmatism; 2) voluntary participation of member countries; 3) principles of equality, mutual respect, and non-interference in the domestic affairs of participating countries; and 4) an institutional structure confined to the national level in order to protect the national sovereignty of the member states. In addition, he pointed out that Eura-

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<sup>40</sup> "Kazakhstan News Bulletin," The Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the USA and Canada, March 21, 2007, <http://prosities-kazakhembus.homestead.com/032107.html>.

sian integration in this form in no way meant bringing the Soviet Union back to life.<sup>41</sup>

The Customs Union came into existence in 2010 with the implementation of a common customs tariff and joint customs code between Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. In July 2011, customs controls along the common border were abolished and a common internal tariff was adopted, which led to significant increases in Kazakhstan's tariffs as the new tariff was based on the higher Russian tariff. In January 2012, furthermore, border controls were abolished, an EEC Court was set up, and a new body, the Eurasian Economic Commission, became the principal coordinating body of the Customs Union.<sup>42</sup> The latter subsequently evolved into the Eurasian Economic Union on January 1, 2015. Armenia joined as a new member on the same date, Kyrgyzstan six months later, while Tajikistan has also declared its intention to join.

At present, this integrated single market comprises 183 million people and stipulates the free movement of goods, capital, services, and people. It also introduces common transport, agriculture, and, possibly, energy policies. In essence, therefore, the EEU is to a certain extent modeled on the initial idea of economic integration driving the European integration process.

The line of thinking underpinning Nazarbayev's economic approach to Eurasian integration seems to rest on two key assumptions: that economics and politics can be strictly divided, and that a union in which one member has overwhelming economic and political power can really be an association of equals. There is however reason to doubt the feasibility of these assumptions, not least whether the integration process can be confined to economic matters. If the EU is to serve as model, as has been indicated by Russian President Vladimir Putin, this would imply the need to create a single currency and supranational institutions, such as

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<sup>41</sup> Nursultan Nazarbaev, "Evraziyskii Soiuz: ot idei k istorii budushchego," *Izvestiia*, October 25, 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Weitz, "The Customs Union and Eurasian Union: A Primer," in *Putin's Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and Its Discontents*, edited by S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell (Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute – Silk Road Studies Program, 2014), 32-33.

a Eurasian Union parliament and an independent bureaucracy to administer the common economic policies. Kazakhstan's leadership has reacted negatively to such ideas emphasizing that if it would lead to a political union potentially infringing upon Kazakhstan's national sovereignty, then Kazakhstan would reserve the right to leave the organization.<sup>43</sup> Thus, even if Nazarbayev was instrumental in the formation of the EEU, there have been some recent signs that the Kazakh leadership's conception of the EEU may diverge from that of President Putin. Unsurprisingly, a number of analysts have pointed out the potential for Russia-Kazakhstan tensions over the future orientation of the Eurasian integration project.<sup>44</sup>

Irrespective of how far the EEU will expand in the future, as of yet the actual benefits of the EEU for Kazakhstan are by no means clear. Thus far, several "costs" have plunged Kazakhstan into a significant economic slowdown with growth in 2015 estimated to be as low as 1.2 percent – similar to the financial crisis of 2009. Although the major source of the downturn is plummeting oil prices, there have been additional factors. The freefall of the Russian ruble forced the Kazakh Central Bank into several devaluations, and in August 2015 it decided to let the Kazakh tenge float freely. Since the start of the Customs Union, the domestic market has also been flooded with Russian goods, leading Kazakhstan's negative trade balance with Russia (and Belarus) to increase as more expensive Russian goods replaced cheaper imports.<sup>45</sup> In January 2015, Russian imports to Kazakhstan increased by 7 percent year-on-year, while Kazakhstan's exports to Russia dropped by as much as 41 percent.<sup>46</sup> Following the influx of more expen-

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<sup>43</sup> "Glava Kazakhstana ne isklyuchaet vozmozhnosti vykhoda iz EAES," *Argumenty i Fakty*, August 31, 2014, <http://www.aif.ru/money/market/1327675>.

<sup>44</sup> For a view from Kazakhstan, see Dosym Satpaev, "Kazakhstan and the Eurasian Economic Union: The View from Astana," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, January 12, 2015, [http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_kazakhstan\\_and\\_the\\_eurasian\\_economic\\_union\\_view\\_from\\_astana395](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_kazakhstan_and_the_eurasian_economic_union_view_from_astana395).

<sup>45</sup> John C. K. Daly, "Kazakhstan and Belarus: Buyer's Remorse?," in *Putin's Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and Its Discontents*, 85.

<sup>46</sup> Sergei Gretsky, "Hanging in the Trade Balance: Is Free Trade a Curse for Kazakhstan?" *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, June 10, 2015, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/>

sive products from Russia at the expense of cheaper Chinese goods, consumer prices have risen. At the same time, Russian imports, now cheaper due to the fall of the ruble, have weakened the sale of domestic products. Western sanctions against Russia (as well as Russia's counter-sanctions) have further created challenges for Kazakhstan given the impact sanctions and the economic downturn in Russia have had on all EEU member countries.<sup>47</sup>

Regarding the future dynamics of the EEU, the critical question is whether the organization will develop toward closed regional protectionism or a more open regionalism. The latter option, based on market forces driving economic relations rather than political decisions, would be more beneficial for Kazakhstan.<sup>48</sup> Nazarbayev, for one, has certainly spoken strongly in favor of open markets and the danger of protectionism.<sup>49</sup> Whether the open integration and cooperation model Nazarbayev envisions is compatible with the EEU's partial tendency to be a protectionistic response to EU and Chinese markets remains to be seen. In general, China has not opposed Russian-led integration in Central Asia. This is likely to remain the case unless it would directly threaten China's economic investments in the region. Indeed, China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) Initiative, announced by President Xi Jinping on a 2013 trip to Kazakhstan, coincided with Moscow fiercely promoting its own EEU integration project. Although Moscow and Beijing have discussed plans to connect the EEU and the SREB, progress has thus far been limited to a joint declaration.<sup>50</sup> In fact, given the fundamentally dif-

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publications/analytical-articles/item/13228-hanging-in-the-trade-balance-is-free-trade-a-curse-for-kazakhstan?.html.

<sup>47</sup> Sean Roberts, "The Ukraine Conflict and the Future of Kazakhstan's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 388*, September 15, 2015.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Pomfret, "The Economics of the Customs Union and Eurasian Union," in *Putin's Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and Its Discontents*, 57-58.

<sup>49</sup> "10<sup>th</sup> Asia-Europe Meeting: Nazarbayev's speech," *AKIPress News Agency*, October 17, 2014, /www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-386241045.html.

<sup>50</sup> Ivan Zuenko, "Connecting the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt: Current Problems and Challenges for Russia," *China in Central Asia*, October 30, 2015, <http://chinaincentralasia.com/2015/10/30/connecting-the-eurasian-economic-union-and-the-silk-road-economic-belt-current-problems-and-challenges-for-russia/>.

ferent nature of these two projects, it is unlikely to happen in the near future. Nonetheless, given Beijing's vast economic superiority, it is not difficult to envisage any merger leading to the SREB subsuming the limping EEU.

Moreover, the ongoing war in Ukraine and the Kyiv government's ever-closer relations with the EU have raised some serious doubts regarding the future viability of the Eurasian project. Without Ukraine, a major European country with an extended common border with Russia, a post-Soviet Eurasian integration arrangement would be incomplete. The implications of Kazakhstan's membership in the EEU have also been a source of concern for the EU. After all, the EU is Kazakhstan's largest trading partner. In the crisis between the EU and Russia, Kazakhstan risks being trapped in the middle, unless it is able to dispel the notion that its EEU membership does not in fact entail being under Russia's thumb.

### **Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)**

In addition to the predominant economic dimension of Eurasian integration, there is also a parallel military component that has evolved out of the CIS – namely the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). During the May 1992 Tashkent CIS Summit, Kazakhstan signed up to a collective security agreement together with Russia, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The following year, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Georgia also joined and the treaty came into effect in 1994. Furthermore, in 2002, it was among the six countries that agreed to formally create the CSTO as a military alliance.<sup>51</sup>

As a regional organization for mutual defense, the CSTO is designed with the intention to promote peace, strengthen international and regional security and stability, and secure collective defense of the member states' territorial integrity and sovereignty. Yet, it must be noted that the CSTO's track record in these areas has been rather underwhelming. During the violent ethnic clashes in southern

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<sup>51</sup> The six members of the CSTO are Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan refused to renew the treaty in 1999, prior to the formation of the CSTO. Uzbekistan re-joined in 2006, but then suspended its membership in 2012, before terminating it altogether in 2013.

Kyrgyzstan in June 2010, Kyrgyzstan's interim government explicitly called on the CSTO to intervene and stop the bloodshed, but to no avail. The CSTO has proven equally unable to address the frequent outbreaks of violence along poorly demarcated borders in the Fergana Valley. Formally, the inability to address intra-state conflicts relates to the fact that the CSTO has no mandate to interfere in domestic affairs. Nonetheless, this does not alter the fact that the CSTO has been unable to transcend the divisions within the Eurasian region.

According to the organizational framework of the CSTO, the heads of the member states meet at an annual summit. But it is in fact the secretary general of the organization who is responsible for coordinating relations among member states and issuing decisions and statements. Notwithstanding, the CSTO has largely functioned "as an umbrella structure that keeps up the appearance of a collective security system, which has never actually come into existence."<sup>52</sup> Even so, Russia-Kazakhstan military cooperation is crucial for Kazakhstan's defense policy. This cooperation takes place both bilaterally, through the CSTO Council of Foreign Ministers, and through the CSTO's Rapid Reaction Force in which Kazakh military personnel have a highly visible presence. As a member of the CSTO, furthermore, Kazakhstan is eligible to purchase Russian military equipment at subsidized prices and both countries share joint air defense.<sup>53</sup>

With the expansion of the EEU in 2015 that saw Armenia and Kyrgyzstan join as new members – Tajikistan is also likely to apply for membership in the future – this would mean a symmetric composition of the EEU and the CSTO. As such, this could add momentum for closer alignment between the two organizations. At least, this may be on Moscow's mind when hinting at moving beyond economic integration and establishing a Eurasian Union. Again, this hardly corresponds with Kazakhstan's integration outlook.

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<sup>52</sup> Pavel Baev, "The CSTO: Military Dimensions of the Russian Reintegration Effort," in *Putin's Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and Its Discontents*, 42.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Weitz, "Kazakhstan Steppe Eagle Exercise Helps Sustain NATO Ties," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, September 18, 2013, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12816-kazakhstan-steppe-eagle-exercise-helps-sustain-nato-ties.html>.

The inability of the CSTO to emerge as a truly meaningful security alliance relates to the fact that the post-Soviet region is riddled with various conflicts whereby member states have taken different positions. Kazakhstan has not been immune from rifts within the organization. For example, while Armenia seeks to portray the CSTO alliance as its security guarantor with regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Kazakhstan with important interests and functioning relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia – both non-members – has been firm on taking a neutral position in the conflict.<sup>54</sup> Given its domination by Russia, the partiality of the CSTO as a military organization has been displayed in the past year following Russia's proclaimed policy of protecting compatriots abroad, such as in Ukraine. This is obviously an unacceptable policy for Kazakhstan, which has the highest proportion of ethnic Russian citizens in the entire post-Soviet space.

The considerable political influence Russia wields over the organization also manifests itself through curtailing the other member states' involvement with other security institutions. For example, following the onset of conflict in Ukraine CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Borduzha announced that the CSTO had suspended its contacts with NATO, and would instead explore the possibilities of closer alignment with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

### **Shanghai Cooperation Organization**

Since independence, relations between Kazakhstan and China have grown quickly. Apart from extensive bilateral cooperation agreements with China, primarily in the economic domain, Kazakhstan is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which was created in 2001 as the successor to the Shanghai Group established in 1996. The initial purpose of the Shanghai Group, or the Shanghai Five as it became known as after its five members (China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan), was to settle border disputes inherited from Soviet times. The main success was the border delimitation treaties between China and Kazakhstan on the one hand, and China with Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, on the other hand. Of these, the agreement between Kazakhstan and China was the first

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<sup>54</sup> Baev, "The CSTO," 43.

to be concluded, already in 1994. A supplementary agreement in 1998 brought the issue to a final settlement. The delimitation of the border with China opened up for a strategic diversification eastwards of Kazakhstan's external relations.

With the change in status to the SCO following the summit meeting in Shanghai in June 2001, when Uzbekistan joined as member, multilateral cooperation shifted from a narrow focus on border delimitation to the broader issue of regional security. As described in the Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the objectives are:

strengthening mutual trust and good-neighborly friendship among the member states; encouraging effective cooperation among the member states in political, economic and trade, scientific and technological, cultural, educational, energy, communications, environment and other fields; devoting themselves jointly to preserving and safeguarding regional peace, security and stability; and establishing a democratic, fair and rational new international political and economic order.<sup>55</sup>

Structurally, the SCO is a slim organization consisting only of a secretariat in Beijing – led by a Secretary General – and a Regional Counter-Terrorism Structure, with its base in Tashkent. The sparse permanent institutional structure can be explained by the SCO being “designed essentially as an intergovernmental network led by annual summits and by regular meetings of the heads of government, foreign ministers and other high officials of the member states.”<sup>56</sup>

The principal focus of the SCO has always been security, and in that capacity its role overlaps somewhat with that of the CSTO. However, due to Chinese reservations, cooperation between the two organizations has been limited. Moreover, the SCO has never managed to function as a traditional military alliance comparable to NATO, or even the CSTO. Rather than a military alliance, the SCO functions as more of a multilateral platform used to address common threats to member

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<sup>55</sup> Quoted from the Declaration on the Establishment of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, [www.sectsco.org/html/00088.html](http://www.sectsco.org/html/00088.html).

<sup>56</sup> Alyson J. K. Bailes, Pál Dunay, Pan Guang and Mikhail Troitskiy, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *SIPRI Policy Paper No. 17*, May 2007, 4.



states. The member states have found common ground in threats posed by non-state groups, including regional terrorism, ethnic separatism, and religious fundamentalism – commonly referred to as the “three evils” confronting all member states of the organization. The potential threat stemming from radical Islamist groups in Central Asia, including Afghanistan, has been a particularly persistent security perception among the five Central Asian states as well as China and Russia. To strengthen its capacity to counter extremism, the SCO has organized a number of exercises. In spite of this, the SCO does not bolster any concrete structures that can be employed in case a crisis erupts, such as a rapid reaction force. Consequently, the organization’s ability to provide an effective regional security structure, especially one that would counter threats emanating from Afghanistan, remains untested.<sup>57</sup>

The key to whether the SCO will emerge as a truly meaningful security guarantor in the region is if China is prepared to assume greater involvement in Central Asian security. Overall, China has thus far seemed content with leaving this role to Russia, with its existing security establishments in the region, in order to focus instead on trade and investment. While it may not wish to be drawn into the risky business of directly engaging with Central Asian security affairs, this is not to say that China does not have a security strategy in the region. Its predominant security concern is the western Chinese region of Xinjiang – its restive Muslim borderland that borders Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. To stabilize Xinjiang, avoiding political instability and chaos in neighboring post-Soviet Central Asia is of critical importance. However, to date, little of China’s defense funds have been spent on security along the borders with the Central Asian countries. The preferred method is instead to work for security and stability through the means of regional economic development, which is based on the presumption that raising living standards will quell potential unrest. In this sense,

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<sup>57</sup> Marcel de Haas, “Central Asia’s waking giant,” *Daily Times*, January 19, 2009, <http://www.clingendael.nl/publication/central-asias-waking-giant?lang=nl>; Stephen Blank, “The Battle for Kunduz and its Repercussions,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, October 22, 2015, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13295-the-battle-for-kunduz-and-its-repercussions.html>.

connecting Xinjiang to an economically developing Central Asia is an intrinsic part of the Chinese modernization project in the region.

Whether primarily relying on Russia as security provider for the region is tenable in the slightly longer run is less clear. Indeed, there may be some hints of a possible shift toward a more direct Chinese security role in Central Asia. China has been assisting Tajikistan to prevent infiltration by Islamists from Afghanistan, and counter-terrorism and law enforcement exercises between China and the Central Asian countries have been conducted outside of the SCO framework.<sup>58</sup>

From Kazakhstan's perspective, complementing the issues related to non-traditional security threats with a focus on regional energy policies has been a priority of its intra-organizational work. As a major hydrocarbon producer, Kazakhstan has been interested in developing mechanisms to coordinate the regional energy trade. Before the August 2007 SCO summit in Bishkek, Kazakhstan laid out a plan for the formation of an Asian Energy Strategy in order "to extend energy ties between the member-states, including the creation of unified energy infrastructure to serve as the basis for a common SCO energy market."<sup>59</sup> The SCO Energy Charter was subsequently signed at the Bishkek Summit bringing into being the SCO Energy Club. One of the most important pipeline projects among the SCO members is the Atasu-Alashankou oil pipeline between Kazakhstan and China, transporting not only Kazakh but also Russian oil to China. In this energy alliance, Kazakhstan's growing power in the regional energy system is noteworthy. Besides allowing Russian oil to flow through its pipeline to China, Kazakhstan is also the key transit state for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to reach the Chinese energy market. As noted by one observer, the proactive stance of the Kazakhstani leadership – manifested by the energy vision for the region set out in its Asian Energy Strategy of 2007 – has been instrumental for elevating the role of

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<sup>58</sup> Richard Weitz, "Beijing Ponders Central Asian Security," *China US Focus*, September 15, 2015, <http://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/beijing-polders-central-asian-security/>.

<sup>59</sup> Cohen, *Road to Independence*, 102.

the country in Asia in the energy sphere – in a similar manner to its earlier launching of the CICA confidence-building project.<sup>60</sup>

Regarding the SCO's future whereabouts, Kazakhstan has firmly come out in favor of enlargement. Apart from the current six members, the organization is eyeing the inclusion of the four observer states – India, Pakistan, Iran, and Mongolia. During a summit in Ufa in July 2015, President Nazarbayev welcomed the launch of an accession process for India and Pakistan to become members of the organization, arguing that the “international authority, experience, and economic potential of the two countries would be beneficial for the future of the organization.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, it is in Astana's interest to further balance the dominance of Russia and China by trying to bring in India and Pakistan in the equation.

All in all, the SCO has had positive effects in terms of strengthening relations between China and the Central Asian states. Dialogue between the parties has served to attenuate historically rooted distrust between the Central Asians and their powerful eastern neighbor. There is little doubt that China is the driving force in the SCO. It is also noteworthy that Russia has largely been unable to counter China's expansion into Kazakhstan and the rest of Central Asia. Even while seeking to boot out the U.S., Russia has grudgingly accepted China's dominance of the SCO. In reality, the SCO has rarely, if ever, taken any action contrary to China's interests even if most of its agenda of heightened economic and security cooperation between the Central Asian states and China intrudes on Russia's perceived “sphere of influence.” A prominent example was the SCO summit in Dushanbe in the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion of Georgia and the subsequent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At this summit, Beijing held a strong line against any endorsement of Russia's recognition, resulting in a declaration that failed to even mention this event; this differed remarkably from

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<sup>60</sup> Sreemati Ganguli, “The SCO: An Energy Alliance in the Making,” in *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Eurasian Geopolitics*, edited by Michael Fredholm (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2013), 284.

<sup>61</sup> “Kazakhstan Supports the Accession of India and Pakistan to the SCO,” *Tengrinews*, July 11, 2015, [http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics\\_sub/Kazakhstan-supports-accession-of-India-and-Pakistan-to-SCO-261190/](http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics_sub/Kazakhstan-supports-accession-of-India-and-Pakistan-to-SCO-261190/).

the considerably more pro-Russian declaration released by the CSTO, in which China is absent, the same month.<sup>62</sup> It can thus be argued that Russia's interest in the SCO is lukewarm, even if it serves as a means to "manage" and supervise China's influence in Central Asia.

## Summary

Although Kazakhstan has sought to establish strong relations with international actors well beyond its immediate neighborhood, the close cultural, economic, and security links between Kazakhstan and Russia are of upmost significance for Kazakhstan, just as the impact of China on the country's development has increased with lightning pace in the past decades. Concomitantly, cooperation with the Central Asian states is needed to counter various potential security threats transcending national borders. With regards to Eurasian cooperation and integration, Kazakhstan has been an active participant in the following initiatives:

- To address mutual concerns, the Central Asian countries formed the Interstate Council for the Aral Sea basin in 1993 and agreed to establish a nuclear weapon-free region in 2006.
- In the field of economic integration, early hopes in the form of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization fell into oblivion when Russia asserted its dominance regarding economic integration in the wider Eurasian space.
- In 1997, the Asian Development Bank-led Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation program (CAREC) was launched and has since then funded projects linked to transport, energy, and trade worth approximately \$21 billion.
- President Nazarbayev's early efforts to push for the economic integration of Eurasia contributed to the establishment of the Customs Union between Kazakhstan, Russia, and Belarus in 2010. This was transformed into the

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<sup>62</sup> Elisabeth Wishnick, "China's Challenges in Central Asia: Fallout from the Georgian War, the Financial Crisis, and the Xinjiang Riots," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* no. 73, September 2009, [http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/pepm\\_073.pdf](http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/pepm_073.pdf).

Eurasian Economic Union in 2015, with Armenia and Kyrgyzstan as new members.

- Through bilateral and multilateral efforts, Kazakhstan has managed to conclude agreements on the delimitation of borders with all of its neighbors, including with China through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It has also worked successfully to regulate energy transit in the region.
- In the sphere of regional security, Kazakhstan has joined the CSTO and the SCO – and is actively contributing to their development.

## **Kazakhstan in the International Arena**

The foundation of Kazakhstan's foreign policy is cordial relations with other states. This principle is enshrined in Article 8 of the Constitution, which declares the importance of "good-neighborly relations" and international cooperation. To that effect, Kazakhstan has signed strategic partnerships with Russia, China, the United States, and key European countries such as France and, in 2013, the United Kingdom. These strategic partnerships have strengthened over the past few years: Russia and Kazakhstan signed a Good Neighbor and Alliance Treaty for the 21st Century in 2013; a Strategic Partnership Dialogue Commission has recently been established with the United States; in 2014, China and Kazakhstan signed a declaration to strengthen their strategic partnership; and France and Kazakhstan have declared their intention to raise theirs to a new level. In addition to relationships with the world's major powers, Kazakhstan has formed strategic partnerships with Hungary, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Canada, India, Italy, Spain, and other countries. To complement these bilateral ties, Kazakhstan has pursued a policy of active integration in numerous key international organizations, a topic addressed in this section.

### **Kazakhstan's 2010 OSCE Chairmanship**

Along with the other former Soviet republics, Kazakhstan joined the OSCE in 1992. From 2004, Kazakhstan announced that obtaining the OSCE's rotating chairmanship was a central foreign policy goal and part of its "Path to Europe" foreign policy pillar. The journey to that goal was not free from controversy. Among CIS members, Astana's bid was strongly supported both at the 2005 CIS Summit in Kazan, and at the 2007 Summit in Dushanbe. Russia, in particular, actively bolstered Kazakhstan's bid by arguing "that a decision against Kazakhstan would see the work of the organization grind to a halt and lead to the marginali-

zation of the OSCE.”<sup>63</sup> Even though Kazakhstan could count on the strong support from the CIS, some Western member states were less enthusiastic in embracing Kazakhstan's bid. For example, while Germany supported Kazakhstan's chairmanship, France, the U.K., and the U.S. were less supportive, arguing that Kazakhstan's human rights record and democratic deficit made it inappropriate for chairing the organization.<sup>64</sup>

Besides Western governments, Kazakhstan's chairmanship bid immediately drew criticism from human rights and democracy advocates concerned by the gap between the principles defended by the OSCE under its human dimension and the insufficient progress in implementing democratic reforms in Kazakhstan.<sup>65</sup> Linked to this, there were fears that Kazakhstan's chairmanship would possibly endanger the mandate of the OSCE's democratic body – the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) – since Kazakhstan and other CIS countries in the past had expressed a desire to change the status of the ODIHR. Concerns were also raised that the OSCE chairmanship was sought primarily for the purpose of strengthening the country's image and standing in the international arena rather than aiding the work of the OSCE per se.

It proved a major challenge for Astana to overcome these divisions and secure consensus for its bid. Consequently, the foreign ministry outlined a strategy focusing on communicating two scenarios: “focusing on the potential benefits of Astana's presidency for the region and the OSCE, and ... emphasizing the adverse consequences of rejecting the bid.”<sup>66</sup> Overall, this strategy aimed to frame Kazakhstan as a central country for security and stability in the strategic Central Asian region, but also to position itself as a bridge between the OSCE's western and eastern members. In regard to the OSCE's human dimension pillar, where

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<sup>63</sup> Margit Hellwig-Bötte, “Kazakhstan's OSCE Chairmanship – The Road to Europe?” IFSH, *OSCE Yearbook* 12 (2008), 179.

<sup>64</sup> Jos Bonstra, “OSCE Democracy Promotion: Grinding to a Halt?,” *FRIDE Working Paper* 44, October 2007.

<sup>65</sup> For a critical report, see Human Rights Watch, “Political Freedoms in Kazakhstan,” 26, no. 3 (2004).

<sup>66</sup> Cohen, *Road to Independence*, 202-203.

Kazakhstan had been criticized for a lack of respect for human rights, it nonetheless managed to present itself as a stable multiethnic country on its way to democratic reforms.<sup>67</sup>

Ultimately, the government's efforts were successful. Although an agreement was expected in 2006, it was not until the OSCE's end of the year 2007 Ministerial Council meeting in Madrid that Kazakhstan was, as the first CIS country, awarded the chairmanship in a unanimous vote among the 56 member states. However, instead of 2009 as initially planned, Kazakhstan's chairmanship was postponed to 2010 in order to give the government an extended period for implementing reforms in the fields of media freedom and electoral law, as well as local governance. In accordance with this compromise, Kazakhstan amended and passed several laws relating to media, elections, political party registration, freedom of religion, and representation of national minorities.<sup>68</sup> In addition, Astana adopted a National Human Rights Action Plan, and strengthened its mission to the OSCE by increasing its professional staff and financial endowment. Experienced diplomat Kanat Saudabayev was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs specifically to spearhead the preparation for assuming the chairmanship.<sup>69</sup>

How then did the Kazakh chairmanship unfold with regards to the critical objections on human rights and democracy? Kazakhstan organized a number of meetings related to the human dimension, including the second OSCE Parallel Civil Society Conference in Astana – an event that has since been held once a year. Fear that the work of the ODIHR would be constrained turned out to be unfounded, as it was able to operate autonomously without interference of the Chairman-in-Office (CiO) or any other member state.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, in 2010, four elec-

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<sup>67</sup> Murat Laumulin, "Kazakhstan's OSCE Chairmanship: History and Challenges," IFSH, *OSCE Yearbook 14* (2010), 317-326.

<sup>68</sup> Although to the disappointment of Western observers and local human rights groups, some liberal legislation has since then been reverted.

<sup>69</sup> Pal Dunay, "Kazakhstan's Unique OSCE Chairmanship in 2010," IFSH, *OSCE Yearbook 14* (2010), 52.

<sup>70</sup> Janusz Bugasjki, Margarita Assenova, and Richard Weitz, "Kazakhstan's OSCE Chairmanship 2010. Final Report," IND/CSIS, U.S.-Kazakhstan OSCE Task Force, December 2009, 15-16.



tion-monitoring missions were conducted in CIS countries. As for the general effectiveness of Kazakhstan's chairmanship, an evaluation conducted by the U.S.-Kazakhstan OSCE Task Force gave the following verdict:

Kazakhstan provided capable and energetic leadership for the organization at a difficult time in its evolution. A major achievement of the Kazakh chair was bringing the attention of the OSCE to Central Asia and emphasizing its Eurasian dimension – in highlighting security problems stemming from the Afghan conflict, potential failed states, destabilizing economic and environmental problems, and vexing human rights issues.<sup>71</sup>

Kazakhstan's year at the helm of the OSCE was rounded off with the December 2010 Astana Summit, the first OSCE Summit held in 11 years. Some critics saw the inability to find an agreement on the "Astana Framework for Action" as proof of the meeting as amounting to little more than a symbolic event. This critique must, however, be somewhat qualified in light of the rather limited prerogatives of the chairmanship position.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, Kazakhstan's ability to achieve concrete results in the OSCE were tempered by the Russian government's hostility and disinterest toward the organization.

In conclusion, irrespective of the fact that Kazakhstan's chairmanship was characterized by professionalism and further underlined its international position as a serious and reliable international actor, there can be little doubt that its domestic political record has proven a liability. Given that Kazakhstan's CiO drew increased international attention to and debate on this shortcoming, the extent to which the country actually benefited from the chairmanship for public relations purposes, as argued by human rights organizations, remains difficult to assess. On the one hand, it gave Astana the opportunity to demonstrate its ability to effectively organize a chairmanship of a major international organization, but, on the other hand, it hardly paid off in softening criticism against the government in other areas.

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, vi.

<sup>72</sup> Dunay, "Kazakhstan's Unique OSCE Chairmanship in 2010."

## Kazakhstan and the ASEM

Kazakhstan officially joined the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) – an international forum for dialogue and cooperation between the two continents – in October 2014, and took part in its 10<sup>th</sup> Summit in Milan that month. ASEM functions as an informal process of dialogue and cooperation between 31 European and 22 Asian countries. The nature of Kazakhstan's accession to ASEM appears to have been rather rapid. In April 2014, Astana officially asked Bangladesh to support its inclusion in ASEM. The topic was then reportedly discussed in several bilateral talks between Kazakhstan and the European Commission, making the accession yet another result of diligent diplomatic work.<sup>73</sup>

The forum's informal nature, its lack of institutional foundation, and weak public visibility has led some critics to refer to ASEM as a "talk-shop," unable to produce concrete achievements.<sup>74</sup> Lacking institutions as well as a budget, ASEM is essentially a summit-driven dialogue between leaders in Asia and Europe.<sup>75</sup> Accepting ASEM for what it is – a forum for dialogue and not an organization – its functions have nonetheless deepened and broadened over the years.<sup>76</sup> While some countries, mostly from Asia, have raised the possibility of developing cooperation mechanisms within the framework of the ASEM, such as free trade zones and visa facilitation, there is still uncertainty whether ASEM could develop

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<sup>73</sup> "Kazakhstan seeks Dhaka backing for ASEM entry," *Bdnews24.com*, April 21, 2014, <http://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2014/04/21/kazakhstan-seeks-dhaka-backing-for-asem-entry>; "FM Meets with Southeast Asian Ambassadors, Improves Ties," *Astana Calling*, no. 368, August 22, 2014, <http://www.mfa.kz/images/AstanaCalling/368/Astana%20Calling%20No.368.pdf>; "José Manuel Barroso of European Commission, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev have a phone talk," *Tengrinews.kz*, August 20, 2014, [http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics\\_sub/Jos-Manuel-Barroso-of-European-Commission-Kazakhstans-255556/](http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics_sub/Jos-Manuel-Barroso-of-European-Commission-Kazakhstans-255556/).

<sup>74</sup> Alessandra Brovelli et al., "Invisible Forum? The Public Outreach of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)," *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 6, no. 4 (2010): 541.

<sup>75</sup> Jacques Pelkmans and Weinian Hu, "Does ASEM work?" *CEPS Policy Brief No. 321*, October 14, 2014, 2.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

mechanisms for concrete cooperation, or whether it will remain a loose forum for informal discussion and consultation.<sup>77</sup>

Kazakhstan's membership nevertheless makes sense if viewed from the country's broader foreign policy goals to serve as a bridge between Europe and Asia, and to attract foreign investment and develop into a commercial hub in the development of a modern-era Silk Road. At the Milan Summit, Nazarbayev took part in the plenary session entitled "Enhancing business relations to foster economic integration between Europe and Asia," and delivered a speech where he emphasized the importance of the Eurasian region in general and Kazakhstan in particular as a hub of economic flows and energy resources connecting Europe and Asia.<sup>78</sup> Thus, rather than a significant foreign policy vehicle on its own, the ASEM seat should be understood as a logical part of Kazakhstan's desire to embed its foreign policy in as many multilateral forms of cooperation as possible.

### **Kazakhstan and the WTO**

The issue of membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) has loomed over Kazakhstan's foreign policy for two decades now. The country applied for membership back in 1996, and its accession process was qualified as having reached an "advanced phase" already in 2004. However, despite various Kazakhstani and WTO officials repeatedly committing to Kazakhstan's membership and expectations of imminent accession over the past decade, numerous disagreements, stemming from procedural, technical, as well as geopolitical factors, led to one of the most protracted negotiation periods of any country seeking WTO membership.

Despite the prolonged negotiation process, membership in the WTO remained the leading trade policy goal of the government, which was also keen to emphasize the importance of not rushing into the WTO but to join under favorable con-

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<sup>77</sup> David Fouquet, "Preparations for Milan ASEM Summit Launched Amid Uncertainty," European Institute for Asian Studies, *Asian News Outlook*, May 5, 2014, [http://european194.rssing.com/chan-15274345/all\\_p6.html](http://european194.rssing.com/chan-15274345/all_p6.html).

<sup>78</sup> "10<sup>th</sup> Asia-Europe Meeting: Nazarbayev's speech."

ditions. The persistence eventually bore fruit and on July 27, 2015, the members of the WTO formally approved Kazakhstan's WTO terms by signing the accession of Kazakhstan to the organization, nearly twenty years after the accession process started. On November 30, Kazakhstan *de jure* became a full member of the WTO.

To better understand why the country's accession took such a long time, several factors must be taken into account. A first factor relates to the technical and complex nature of the accession process itself, including a number of steps during the process. By comparison, the process lasted 19 years for Russia while China was admitted after 15 years of negotiations. The drawn-out process is thus not unique to Kazakhstan. Moreover, Kazakhstan's early enthusiasm was somewhat dampened by the developments in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, which was admitted already in 1998, after a record short negotiation process of less than three years. In Kyrgyzstan, accession had some serious repercussions, including eroding the country's industrial base, precipitating an initial economic decline. To avoid a similar scenario, Kazakhstan's early enthusiasm for rapid accession gave way to a focus on joining on favorable terms "in order to exploit the economic and resource, transit-transport and export potential of the country, as well as to create conditions for the safe development of the national economy and its attractiveness for investment."<sup>79</sup> As noted by the economist Richard Pomfret, "some learning process is reflected in Kazakhstan's lengthier and more detailed WTO negotiations, and harder stance on some of the voluntary codes."<sup>80</sup>

Two periods of de-intensified negotiations can be identified. The first occurred in 1998-2001, following the Russian financial crisis and its contagion effects on Kazakhstan. The second period of lower intensity negotiations took place from 2008

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<sup>79</sup> "Foreign Policy Concept for 2014-2020," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Kazakhstan, April 25, 2014, <http://www.mfa.kz/index.php/en/foreign-policy/foreign-policy-concept-for-2014-2020-republic-of-kazakhstan>.

<sup>80</sup> Richard Pomfret, "Trade Policies in Central Asia after EU Enlargement and Before Russian WTO Accession: Regionalism and Integration into the World Economy," paper presented at the American Economic Association annual conference in Philadelphia, January 7-9, 2005, <http://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/9309513.pdf>.

to 2012, also linked to Russia. Indeed, Kazakhstan had appeared to be on a promising path to WTO accession by 2007-08, but at that time the U.S. and EU made Russian accession the major policy priority, consequently leaving Kazakhstan's accession on the backburner. It was not until Russia's accession in 2012 that Kazakhstan's own accession to the WTO attracted renewed attention.<sup>81</sup> Thereafter, however, Kazakhstan's negotiations also became somewhat complicated by its membership in the Eurasian Customs Union (in 2015 expanded into the EEU).

The direct gains to be had from WTO membership may not be immediate since Kazakhstan's main exports are natural resources that tend to have markets irrespective of a trade regime. Yet membership would nevertheless require some reform efforts that would be positive for the transformation of the Kazakh economy into an open rules-based market economy. As noted in a recent report:

WTO membership would provide a lock-in effect on reforms, and provide positive impact on foreign investment. The issues are important in the long term. As Kazakhstan seeks to diversify its economy away from a dependence on oil and gas, it faces considerable challenges that derive largely from its geography. Transport, trade and investment are going to be key in any diversification attempt; and in this context, it makes sense for Kazakhstan to focus on building a service-based rather than industry-based economy, on building a long-term role in the world economy on productivity, and on being embedded in an institutional and legal framework. The WTO membership would be supportive of such a path. Thus in the long term, WTO membership will help Kazakhstan improve its ability to avoid the 'resource curse.'<sup>82</sup>

In other words, the critical aspect here is to understand the positives from WTO membership in the wider and longer perspective. Imports are likely to be less costly and more diversified, and since 90 percent of Kazakhstan's trade flows are connected to WTO members, it would make little sense to stay outside the WTO's orbit. Moreover, as argued in a UNDP report as part of its regional Aid

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<sup>81</sup> S. Frederick Starr et al., "Looking Forward: Kazakhstan and the United States," *Silk Road Paper* (Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute – Silk Road Studies Program, September 2014).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

for Trade project, “multilateralism, unanimity, non-discrimination, transparency, and predictability give members the protection of international trade law that an outward-oriented economy needs.”<sup>83</sup>

## Kazakhstan and the OECD

Although Kazakhstan has been involved in OECD projects since 1993, its membership aspirations were first made public in June 2011 during a meeting between Prime Minister Karim Massimov and the OECD’s Secretary-General, José Angel Gurría.<sup>84</sup> The ambition to join the organization has since consolidated following the unveiling of the “Kazakhstan 2050” strategy in December 2012. The new strategy, which comes upon the earlier “Kazakhstan 2030” strategy adopted in 1997, sets out an ambitious plan for turning the country into one of the world’s top 30 developed nations by 2050.<sup>85</sup> Seen in this context, joining the OECD – the club of developed countries – would be a logical part of facilitating the reforms needed for implementing the long-term development strategy. The OECD’s function as a benchmark for Kazakhstan was spelled out by President Nazarbayev:

Today the member states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) represent basic indicators of developed countries. This organization brings together 34 countries that produce more than 60 percent of global GDP. ... The OECD member countries have undergone the path of deep modernization. They now demonstrate high rates of investment, scientific re-

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<sup>83</sup> Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland and UNDP, “Trade and Human Development,” *Central Asia Development Series*, 2014, 34, [http://caa-network.org/cassions/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/CA-trade-and-HD-paper-ENG\\_web\\_.pdf](http://caa-network.org/cassions/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/CA-trade-and-HD-paper-ENG_web_.pdf).

<sup>84</sup> “Kazakhstan wants to be part of OECD,” *Tengrinews.kz*, June 28, 2011, [http://en.tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/Kazakhstan-wants-to-be-part-of-OECD-2815/](http://en.tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/Kazakhstan-wants-to-be-part-of-OECD-2815/).

<sup>85</sup> “Kazakhstan’s way – 2050: Common Aim, Common Interests, Common Future. Address of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nursultan A. Nazarbayev to the Nation, January 2014,” The Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the Kingdom of Sweden, January 29, 2014, <http://kzembassy.se/index.php/en/about-kazakhstan/annual-state-of-the-nation-address/kazakhstan-s-way-2050-common-aim-common-interests-common-future-address-of-the-president-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-nursultan-a-nazarbayev-to-the-nation-january-2014>.

search, productivity, a large share of small and medium-sized businesses, and high standards of living. These indicators of OECD countries provide a natural benchmark for Kazakhstan on our way to joining the top 30 developed nations of the world.<sup>86</sup>

In other words, the motivation behind Kazakhstan's endeavors to join the OECD is linked both to benefits to be had from cooperation and information from developed industrial countries for its own modernization strategy, but also due to the relative exclusiveness surrounding OECD with its "club-like" characteristics. Being a part of this club would serve as a confirmation of how far Kazakhstan has progressed since the early days of independence.

Kazakhstan's increasing cooperation with the OECD is part of a process of organizational restructuring ongoing since the end of the Cold War. From having been an organization mainly reserved for wealthy European countries, the OECD has evolved into a more open organization aspiring for global influence. In practice, this means a more open membership policy, engagement with new global actors, and outreach to developing countries.<sup>87</sup> The accession pattern to membership is rather flexible and follows not only technical criteria, but aspires to strike a balance between European and non-European members. Political and geopolitical circumstances also influence the accession policy, most recently manifested in the case of Russia's accession process, which was put on hold following the internationally condemned annexation of Crimea.

A closer relationship between Kazakhstan and OECD has evolved on several fronts. In 2013, Kazakhstan (jointly with the EU) was assigned chairmanship of the Central Asia Competitiveness Program as part of the OECD's Eurasia Competitiveness Program. Kazakhstan was also given participatory status in the OECD Committee on Industry, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship, became an observer of seven other committees, and joined the OECD's Global Forum on

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Judith Clifton and Daniel Diaz-Fuentes, "From 'club of the Rich' to 'Globalisation à la carte?' evaluating Reform at the OECD," *Global Policy* 2, no. 3, October 2011: 300-311.

Transparency and Exchange of Information for Tax Purposes. In December 2013, Kazakhstan signed the multilateral Convention on Mutual Administrative Assistance Matters, an instrument designed to fight international tax avoidance and evasion. A few months later, the two parties signed a Letter of Intent on Statistics, which should promote closer cooperation in accounting and statistics practices. Finally, and most significantly, a Memorandum of Understanding on a two-year bilateral country program was signed in the beginning of 2015 focusing on support for institutional reforms in Kazakhstan. Concretely, the country program enables Kazakhstan to take advantage of OECD expertise to strengthen political reform capacity in areas such as governance, environment, health, taxation, and the business climate. Kazakhstan is one of only four countries (the others being Morocco, Peru, and Thailand) benefiting from this agreement. This cooperation program is intended to improve Kazakhstan's integration with the world economy.<sup>88</sup>

Increasing cooperation between Kazakhstan and the OECD over the past few years has been accompanied by several surveys and assessments on various aspects of the country's development. The conclusions reached in these publications give an overview of the kind of reforms and progress necessary for Kazakhstan to obtain full membership. For example, a recent review on the country's central administration argued that political power is excessively concentrated and that a de-centralization of the policy-making process is needed. Another review of anti-corruption work noted insufficient implementation of reforms related to criminalization and prevention of corruption.<sup>89</sup> In the 2014 Corruption Per-

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<sup>88</sup> "Kazakhstan and OECD Sign Cooperation Agreement for 2015-2016," *KZ Newslines*, January 26, 2015, <http://kznewsline.com/kazakhstan-and-oecd-sign-cooperation-agreement-for-2015-2016/>; "OECD Bolsters Relationship with Kazakhstan – Signs Kazakhstan Country Programme Agreement," *OECD News*, January 22, 2015, <http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/oecd-bolsters-relationship-with-kazakhstan-signs-kazakhstan-country-programme-agreement.htm>.

<sup>89</sup> OECD, "Kazakhstan – Review of the Central Administration," *Public Governance Review 2014*, <http://www.oecd.org/corruption/anti-bribery/Kazakhstan-Round-3-Monitoring-Report-ENG.pdf>; OECD, "Anti-Corruption Reforms in Kazakhstan," *Anti-Corruption Network for Eastern Europe and Central Asia*, 2014,



ceptions Index published by Transparency International, Kazakhstan was placed ahead of the other Central Asian states and Russia, but behind Belarus, and significantly below states such as Malaysia and South Korea, which the Kazakh government has held up as models for its own Asian path of development.<sup>90</sup>

## Kazakhstan and NATO

In 1992, Kazakhstan and the four other Central Asian states joined NATO's Council of North Atlantic Cooperation (renamed the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council in 1997). Following the creation of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 1994 – a specific structure designed to enhance dialogue between NATO and former Soviet republics, the countries of the former Republic of Yugoslavia, and several EU countries – the country was given the opportunity to build an individual relationship with NATO. Kazakhstan grasped this opportunity in 1995, and is the only country in Central Asia to have advanced its cooperation to the level of developing an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) under the PfP.<sup>91</sup> Given that Kazakhstan was already member of two security organizations – CSTO and SCO – the signing of the IPAP in January 2006 serves as a testimony to the country's desire, and, at least partial ability, to balance its international relations also in the military sphere. The deepened cooperation within the IPAP has focused on strengthening cooperation mechanisms with NATO countries and helping to bring Kazakhstan's military closer to Western standards. Kazakhstan has taken an active stance and both hosted and participated in PfP training and exercises; a PfP regional training center exists in Almaty, although its purpose is largely

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<http://www.oecd.org/corruption/anti-bribery/Kazakhstan-Round-3-Monitoring-Report-ENG.pdf>.

<sup>90</sup> Kazakhstan ranked 126 out of 175 states. See Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index 2014," <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2014/results>. The problems with excessively centralized political power has been documented by Freedom House. See Joanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan," in *Nations in Transit* (New York: Freedom House, 2015), 301-322, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/NIT2015\\_Kazakhstan.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/NIT2015_Kazakhstan.pdf).

<sup>91</sup> Roger McDermott, "Kazakhstan Hosts Steppe Eagle 2012," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, September 11, 2011, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=39828&cHash=eca07db663f1c38b9f1a49af7580588f#.U2IjFshwZMs](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=39828&cHash=eca07db663f1c38b9f1a49af7580588f#.U2IjFshwZMs).

symbolical with little practical impact on Kazakhstan's military forces.<sup>92</sup> In the field of counter-terrorism, Kazakhstan participates in the Partnership Action Plan on Terrorism, which includes sharing information with NATO and improving national capabilities to fight terrorism and border security.<sup>93</sup>

In addition, Kazakhstan contributed to humanitarian activities during the U.S.-led operation in Iraq, by sending its own peacekeeping brigade, Kazbrig, under a UN mandate. Kazakhstan's participation in, and integration with, international peacekeeping operations, for example under the NATO flag, is in line with its multi-vector foreign policy, and also aligned with Euro-Atlantic interests. Regarding future objectives, NATO and Kazakhstan have also sought to make Kazbrig fully consistent with NATO by reaching NATO Evaluation Level 2 as well as increasing the single-battalion Kazbrig to a three-battalion brigade. Achieving these mutual objectives would "be a step toward greater interaction between NATO and the Kazakhstani armed forces outside of Kazbrig."<sup>94</sup> Overall, the major driver in Kazakhstan's military partnership with NATO has been the ambition of developing professional and well-equipped Kazakh forces.

The partnership between Kazakhstan and the West in the field of defense and security are nonetheless restrained by Kazakhstan's involvement as a sustaining member of the CSTO and SCO. The need to nurture the relationship with Moscow, in light of the length of their common border and the vast military imbalance between Kazakhstan and Russia, mean that there is not much room for independent maneuverability in the security realm. This difficulty of maintaining a balanced foreign policy has been exacerbated by recent events in Ukraine, which has pitted Russian-led organizations, including Kazakhstan by default, against Western governments and organizations, in particular NATO and the EU.

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<sup>92</sup> McDermott, "Kazakhstan Hosts Steppe Eagle 2012."

<sup>93</sup> "NATO's Relations with Kazakhstan," *European Dialogue*, November 30, 2011, <http://www.eurodialogue.eu/NATO-relations-with-Kazakhstan>.

<sup>94</sup> Starr et al., "Looking Forward," 20.

## Kazakhstan and the EU

Kazakhstan has a stronger European identity as well as a stronger economic and political importance for the EU compared to the other Central Asian states. EU assistance to the country has had a broad focus, ranging from regional and local government development to judicial reform and social and economic reforms. Between 1999 and 2014, bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and the EU were governed by a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. On September 12, 2014, Kazakhstan became the first Central Asian country to successfully conclude an Enhanced Cooperation Agreement with the EU; the agreement is slated to be signed on December 21, 2015 in Astana.. The purpose of the partnership is to lay the foundation for stronger and more developed EU-Kazakhstan relations. While the deal is looser than the Association Agreements and accompanying Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements that the EU has offered Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia within the framework of its Eastern Partnership, it is nonetheless more ambitious than any agreements between the EU and other Central Asia states, or Russia for that matter.

Outgoing President of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso said that the agreement would “greatly facilitate stronger political, economic, and strategic relations as well as the flow of trade, services and investment between Kazakhstan and the European Union and contribute to Kazakhstan’s political, rule of law, and economic reform as well as modernization and prosperity.”<sup>95</sup> The economic dimension of Kazakhstan-EU relations is particularly central to Kazakhstan’s “economic diplomacy.” Nazarbayev, for example, declared in an article for the *Wall Street Journal* that “Kazakhstan borders Russia and China, but the EU is our biggest trading partner.”<sup>96</sup>

The following major areas of cooperation are part of the enhanced partnership: values (democracy, human rights, sustainable development); foreign and security

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<sup>95</sup> “EU, Kazakhstan Forge Closer Ties as Nazarbaev Visits,” *RFE/RL*, October 9, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/kazakhstan-eu/26628531.html>.

<sup>96</sup> Nursultan Nazarbayev, “The Next Chapter in Kazakhstan-EU Relations,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 8, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/the-next-chapter-in-kazakhstan-eu-relations-1412703767>.

policy (regional stability, weapons of mass destruction, cooperation in the fight against terrorism, conflict prevention and crisis management); trade (improving the regulatory environment in various economic sectors); justice, freedom, and security; and enhanced cooperation in 29 key sector policy areas (including economic and financial cooperation, energy, transport, environment, social security, and education). The Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU and the intense lobbying in Europe are parts of its attempts to maintain balance in its foreign policy in a geopolitical context where it has become increasingly difficult to do so.

Apart from bilateral cooperation with the EU, Kazakhstan is also included with the other Central Asian countries in the EU's regional framework. This framework was adopted in 2007 at the initiative of Germany, and a subsequent strategy, reconfirming many of the previous strategy components, was presented in 2015 under the auspices of Latvia's EU presidency. The strategy, which identifies Central Asia as a "region of strategic importance," calls for a relationship that promotes a stable, secure, and sustainable development of the region. It also emphasizes the need for strengthening trade and energy links between the EU and Central Asian countries. Additional elements of the strategy relate to the importance of democracy, human rights, and governance, including developing the rule of law in the region. A new EU Special Representative for Central Asia, Peter Burian, was appointed in order to facilitate dialogue and communication at the highest political level as well as to coordinate and improve the effectiveness of the EU in the region.<sup>97</sup>

As noted, over the past decade the EU has become Kazakhstan's leading trade partner and leading foreign investor, representing over half of total FDI in Kazakhstan. Bilateral trade amounts to about €31 billion, of which Kazakhstan's exports account for €24 billion, primarily oil, while EU exports to Kazakhstan account for about €7.5 billion, dominated by manufactured goods, machinery, and equipment. The top three sources of foreign investments over the past two dec-

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<sup>97</sup> Council of the European Union, "Relations with Central Asia – Council conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia," June 22, 2015.

ades have been the Netherlands, accounting for \$49 billion, the United Kingdom with \$24.7 billion, and the United States with \$17.9 billion. These figures are somewhat misleading though, since several enterprises generally not known as Dutch (e.g. Coca-Cola, Eni, and Lukoil) invest in Kazakhstan through Dutch holding companies. In total, around 15,000 companies with foreign capital are registered in Kazakhstan, including 270 Fortune 500 companies such as Chevron, Siemens, Microsoft, General Electric, Coca-Cola, Danone, and Henkel, among many others. Against this background, the economy is a major incentive for enhanced cooperation between the EU and Kazakhstan as it is intended to promote EU businesses' ability to compete on equal terms with Kazakh counterparts in Kazakhstan and vice versa. In this context, it has also been in the interest of the EU to promote Kazakhstan's membership in the WTO.

In connection with the WTO membership and the enhanced trade agreement with the EU, Astana has actively courted Western governments and companies in an effort to secure foreign investments to revitalize a national economy in dire need of diversification away from an unhealthy dependence on hydrocarbons and state-controlled economic entities. An extensive privatization plan has been announced, but ultimately the degree of interest from foreign investors is dependent on real reforms to improve the country's investment climate. Left unaddressed, issues such as the risk of appropriations, arbitrary taxation, and corruption will hamper the development of the economic relationship between Kazakhstan and potential Western investors.

### **Kazakhstan and International Financial Institutions**

Like in other post-Soviet states, the economic transition in Kazakhstan was undertaken with the support of international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The focus of the reform programs was to create diversified, sustainable economies. Particular attention was devoted to designing and implementing macroe-

conomic reforms and developing institutional structures, which were seen as key to the emergence of free markets in the 1990s. Loans from donors were also needed to assist the national currency (tenge) and critical imports. The IMF provided loans to support convertibility to the new national currency and various macroeconomic stabilizing measures. The World Bank granted loans of technical assistance to various economic sectors, including the oil industry, as well as assisted in the implementation of economic reforms. The EBRD focused on finance projects pertaining to small- and medium-sized business, while the ADB, aside from imports and currency stabilization, was particularly active in funding infrastructural projects.

Overall, the country received a favorable verdict for its progress on economic reforms in the 1990s. The World Bank, for instance, noted:

Following independence in 1991, Kazakhstan was one of the earliest and most vigorous reformers among the countries of the former Soviet Union. In the early years of transition, the state liberalized prices, reduced trade distortions, and facilitated the privatization of small- and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs). The state has also dramatically improved treasury and budget processes. ... The government has established a basic framework to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) into its resource-rich oil and mineral sector.<sup>98</sup>

However, in other sectors, such as creating a truly favorable environment for small- and medium-sized businesses and reducing corruption, the country has consistently been given a less favorable verdict.<sup>99</sup> At the same time, beginning at the turn of the century, an increasing "resource nationalism" has been observed, for example, by amendments to the Foreign Investment Law in order to ensure state control over economic sectors deemed vital to national security.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> World Bank, "Kazakhstan: Country Brief 2003," <http://web.worldbank.org/archive/website00978/WEB/OTHER/5D05C09A.HTM?OpenDocument>.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Robert M. Cutler, "Kazakhstan's Foreign Investment Law Changes Again," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, December 12, 2007.

In contrast to most other ex-Soviet republics, the booming economic development in Kazakhstan since the turn of the millennium enabled the government to repay its foreign debts to the IMF and the World Bank already in the early 2000s, seven years ahead of plan.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, Kazakhstan has broken the mold of regional aid patterns by emerging as a donor itself in recent years. It has, for example, supported the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF). Amidst the recent economic downturn, Kazakhstan has engaged with international financial institutions in a renewed push to carry out 33 comprehensive reform projects in certain institutions and economic sectors. These proposed projects are part of a strategy “to improve access to infrastructure, strengthen the financial sector and support the diversification and competitiveness of its economy.”<sup>102</sup>

### **Kazakhstan's Bid for Non-Permanent Membership in the United Nations Security Council**

In June 2010, Kazakhstan made public its interest in seeking a non-permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for 2017-2018. Three years later, the country kicked off an official campaign to launch its candidacy. Since then, a long series of press releases, official documents, and public speeches from government officials have outlined the rationale behind this foreign policy objective. The campaign is anchored in Kazakhstan's foreign policy concept 2014-2020, where active participation in international organizations is presented as an important tool to protect Kazakhstan's national interests and secure maximum visibility and leverage for its foreign policy in regional as well as global affairs. In the specific context of a non-permanent seat in the UNSC, this objective serves as a final confirmation of Kazakhstan's steadfast commitment to playing a constructive role in international affairs.

A look at Kazakhstan's campaign platform reveals a particular importance assigned to transnational issues with relevance for the UNSC. Four priority areas

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<sup>101</sup> Cohen, *The Road to Independence*, 66.

<sup>102</sup> Lyazzat Shatayeva, “Kazakhstan, International Financial Institutions to Cooperate on Economic Reforms,” *Astana Times*, March 3, 2015, <http://astanatimes.com/2015/03/kazakhstan-intl-financial-institutions-cooperate-economic-reforms/>.

for international cooperation are identified: food security, water security, energy security, and nuclear security.<sup>103</sup> All of which build on areas where Kazakhstan has had long-standing involvement.

The focus on nuclear issues draws on Kazakhstan's successful contribution to disarmament following the collapse of the Soviet Union, when it emerged on the international stage with the fourth-largest nuclear arsenal in the world. Kazakhstan's nuclear security mandated a strong relationship with United States and Russia since the nuclear arsenal was dismantled with their assistance. In 2006, Kazakhstan ratified the Central Asian Nuclear Weapon Free Zone – a legally binding commitment not to manufacture, acquire, test or possess nuclear weapons. In 2015, Kazakhstan also completed negotiations to house the International Atomic Energy Agency's first international Bank of Low Enriched Uranium. As a result of these commitments, the country has been held up as a model for international disarmament and atomic security.

In the energy field, Kazakhstan has emerged as an energy hub and promoter of an energy strategy in Eurasia within the framework of the multilateral Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The upcoming major international exposition, EXPO 2017, to be held in Astana has "Future Energy" as leading theme. In both non-proliferation and energy, Kazakhstan has had to navigate relations with the great powers of the United States, Russia and China. As one of the world's leading exporters of grain and flour, Astana argues that it is well positioned to address problems connected with food security. Regarding water, Kazakhstan can point to its own devastating experience with the Aral Sea, once the world's fourth largest lake, which lost up to 90 percent of its volume because of the Soviet Union's ruthless exploitation of nature. Since independence, Kazakhstan has taken the lead in uniting the Central Asian states in attempting to restore the Aral Sea.

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<sup>103</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Kazakhstan's candidature to a non-permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council for 2017-18," Introductory Paper, June 2014, [http://www.kazakhstanunsc.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/UNSC-Introductory-Paper.pdf?dm\\_i=25TS,2IW47,FP1KG9,9781I,1](http://www.kazakhstanunsc.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/UNSC-Introductory-Paper.pdf?dm_i=25TS,2IW47,FP1KG9,9781I,1).



Another recurrent theme in the campaign platform is the emphasis placed on Kazakhstan's role as a representative of a certain cluster of states, including not just the Central Asian region it belongs to but also states in other parts of the world facing similar geographically induced challenges, such as being landlocked or isolated islands.<sup>104</sup> In addition, the country's leading position in the strategically important but often poorly understood Central Asian region, including Afghanistan, makes it a particularly suitable interlocutor in the global arena at a time when the international community is preoccupied with regional conflicts and their humanitarian repercussions. A final theme running through the documents is the added value for the UNSC itself of having Kazakhstan at the table: it would be the first Central Asian country taking a seat and its geographical location would bolster the UNSC's "principle of fair and equitable geographical representation of all member states."<sup>105</sup>

Given the frosty relationships between Russia and Western powers, Kazakhstan through its balanced international diplomacy and strong ties with Russia may have some potential for using a seat at the table to mediate or bridge these tensions. The Russian factor may also be crucial in another sense, since past experiences suggest that a pro-Russian voting pattern in the UN General Assembly is positively linked to a successful candidacy.<sup>106</sup> Kazakhstan's non-involvement in international conflicts and absence of domestic conflicts as well as contributions to UN peacekeeping troops are other factors of importance for whether a candidacy is successful or not. Naturally, Kazakhstani officials have emphasized their achievements in these fields.

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<sup>104</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Why Kazakhstan Should be an Elected Member of the United Nations Security Council for 2017-2018," Position Paper, January 2014, <http://www.kazembassy.ge/Position%20paper%20for%20UN%20SC%2026%20Jan%202014.pdf>.

<sup>105</sup> Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Statement at the Plenary Meeting of the 69<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly," September 26, 2014, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/69/meetings/gadebate/pdf/KZ\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/ga/69/meetings/gadebate/pdf/KZ_en.pdf).

<sup>106</sup> Department of State of the United States of America, "Voting Practices in the United Nations 2013," Report to Congress, March 2014, <http://www.state.gov/p/io/rls/rpt/2013/2013/index.htm>.

Turning to the campaign itself, it has followed a rather conventional promotion strategy. To raise awareness, classic communication measures have been combined with some more unusual initiatives, such as bringing the campaign flag to the North Pole.<sup>107</sup> Diplomatic ties have expanded, as demonstrated by the establishment of six new embassies since the candidacy was announced – in Brazil, Ethiopia, Kuwait, Mexico, South Africa, and Sweden. Moreover, the issue of its candidacy is frequently raised in Kazakhstan's bilateral meetings, and several special envoys have been appointed for the specific purpose of promoting the candidacy. For a successful bid, the role of the permanent missions to the UN is of critical importance since one-third of the delegates are estimated to cast their votes at the UN General Assembly without taking instructions from the governments. Consequently, from 2011 to 2015, Kazakhstan's staff representation in New York has increased from 12 to 17 members. In a further manifestation of the concerted effort to strengthen the mission, Kairat Abdrakhmanov was appointed permanent representative in November 2013. This was undoubtedly a way of building on past experience, as Mr. Abdrakhmanov served as permanent representative to the OSCE before and during Kazakhstan's chairmanship of the organization.

The government is confident the candidacy is gaining traction. In early 2015, the foreign ministry claimed that support had been gathered from 65 countries. Nonetheless, Kazakhstan faces competition for the Asian seat from Thailand – the candidate endorsed by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members. Thus far, Thailand's bid has been less visible although it was launched in 2008, prior to Kazakhstan's bid, under the theme of "Building Bridges for Partnership." However, following the military coup in 2014, Thailand's position appears to have weakened, leading Thai observers to fear that the bid is unlikely to garner support from western governments. Some have even come out arguing for withdrawing the bid, acknowledging under current conditions that Kazakh-

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<sup>107</sup> Nurlan Meirmanov, "Kazakh Flags to be Carried to North Pole," *Astana Times*, March 21, 2015, <http://www.astanatimes.com/2015/03/kazakh-flags-to-be-carried-to-north-pole/>.

stan with its support from Muslim and Western countries stands a better chance of success.<sup>108</sup>

Besides increased international visibility and prestige, Kazakhstan's potential benefits from a non-permanent seat in the UNSC would largely depend on its ability to influence the UNSC in three ways. First, a stated ambition of Kazakhstan is to contribute to improve the effectiveness of the UNSC's working methods. In this context, there exist examples of previous non-permanent members, such as New Zealand and Argentina in the 1990s, successfully contributing to procedural reforms of the UNSC. Concrete ways of enabling the country to do so during the membership can be aided by chairing the UNSC Informal Working Group on Documentation and Other Procedural Questions (IWG).<sup>109</sup> Second, the rotating presidency of the Security Council helps non-permanent members to expand their agenda-setting power in the negotiations leading up to the stipulation of monthly work programs. Utilizing this vehicle may present Kazakhstan with its best opportunity to bring in those areas of work prioritized in its campaign platform. Third, there is also the opportunity of assuming a kind of mediator function. Here, Kazakhstan's well-established "multi-vector" foreign policy is the foremost asset. Due to its long-standing stable relations with all members, Kazakhstan can with some confidence claim to fit that bill.

## Summary

To find its place in the world, Kazakhstan has actively courted multilateral organizations. In comparison to other states in the region, such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, which have lacked the political will to commit to multilateral cooperation and prefer to negotiate their foreign policy on a bilateral basis, Kazakhstan has even initiated a number of multilateral forms of cooperation, in

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<sup>108</sup> Wiraj Sriping, "Thai Government Urged to Withdraw Bid for UN Security Council Seat," *The Nation*, July 27, 2015, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/politics/Govt-urged-to-withdraw-bid-for-UN-Security-Council-30265286.html>.

<sup>109</sup> Alejandro Rodiles, "Non-Permanent Members of the United Nations Security Council and the Promotion of the International Rule of Law," *Goettingen Journal of International Law* 5, no. 2 (2013): 333-373.

spheres as diverse as economic integration, nonproliferation, and inter-religious tolerance. The following list provides an overview of Kazakhstan's major multi-lateral partnerships since independence:

- To develop as a professional military force, Kazakhstan has formed a military partnership with NATO. In 2006, Kazakhstan signed an Individual Partnership Action Plan with the alliance.
- Relations between Kazakhstan and the EU reached a new level in January 2015, when an Enhanced Cooperation Agreement was initialed. The agreement is expected to be signed in 2016, and will increase the flow of trade, services, and investments between Kazakhstan and the EU, which is the country's leading trade partner.
- A major foreign policy victory for Kazakhstan was when it presided over the chairmanship of the OSCE in 2010. Even though the decision was by no means uncontroversial, given that Kazakhstan's democratic and human rights deficits opened up to criticism from Western governments and international human rights organizations, the manner in which Kazakhstan assumed responsibility was generally praised as effective and balanced. The chairmanship was rounded off with hosting the Astana Summit, the first OSCE Summit held in eleven years.
- At the end of 2012, it was announced that one of the largest international expos of the decade would be held in Astana in 2017. EXPO 2017 will take place over three months and is expected to draw three to five million visitors making it the largest international gathering to have ever taken place in Central Asia. The major theme of Expo 2017 is "Future Energy."
- The admission of Kazakhstan into the ASEM in 2014 represented an acknowledgment of Kazakhstan's development as a respected international partner country among Asian as well as European countries.
- The long-standing goal of accession to the WTO was finally realized in July 2015 when it became the organization's 162<sup>nd</sup> member after nearly twenty years of negotiations.
- Kazakhstan has announced bids for becoming a member of the OECD and a non-permanent member of the UNSC.

## Conclusions: Understanding Kazakhstan's International Engagements

The distinguishing characteristic of Kazakhstan's external policy in the past decade has been that of a balanced model with partnerships reaching out as broadly as possible. This "multi-vector" model has been embraced to varying degrees by the other Central Asian states as well as Afghanistan. However, Kazakhstan has tried to manage several fronts simultaneously and to forge a positive balance – unlike for example Uzbekistan, whose strategic partnerships have tended to be more antagonistic and exclusive with often rapid U-turns in terms of direction. As noted in a comparative analysis of the two countries:

when the country leaned toward the West, Uzbek relations with Russia soured and rhetoric against Russian ambitions grew fairly loud. Conversely, Uzbekistan leaned increasingly on Russia as relations with the United States worsened and anti-American diatribes from Tashkent grew louder. The pursuit of good relations with any one great power for Tashkent has come at the expense of relations with another. Kazakhstan has pursued a different policy, seeking inclusive and compatible relationships with the three great powers of most consequence in the region. Kazakhstan has built ties with the United States in tandem with, rather than at the expense of, ties with Russia. Both foreign policies seek balance, albeit in different manners.<sup>110</sup>

Oftentimes such partnerships have originated in Kazakhstan's own domestic challenges and the partnerships needed to address them. Nuclear security, for example, has mandated a strong relationship with United States and Russia since

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<sup>110</sup> Svante E. Cornell, "Finding Balance: The Foreign Policies of Central Asia's States," in *Strategic Asia 2007-08: Domestic Political Change and Grand Strategy*, edited by Ashley J. Tellis and Michael Wills (Washington, DC: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2007), 293.

Kazakhstan's nuclear arsenal, which it inherited from the Soviet Union upon independence, was principally dismantled with their assistance.

Kazakhstan's expanding partnership with China has been imperative for reducing its dependence on Russia. In 2005, Kazakhstan diversified its oil export routes with the opening of a major oil pipeline, Atasu-Alashankou, to China. The China-Central Asia gas pipeline, which was inaugurated in 2009 and runs from Turkmenistan across Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, fulfils a similar purpose as it broke Gazprom's gas import monopoly from Central Asia. Bilateral trade with China has expanded steadily over the past two decades and is today roughly equal in volume to Kazakhstan's total trade with Russia, both valued at around \$23 billion in 2013. Thus, partnership with China is an important element in Kazakhstan's foreign policy, as it has helped diversify export routes for hydrocarbons – Kazakhstan's major economic advantage in its external relations. Concomitantly, for China Kazakhstan's emergence as the leading Central Asian powerhouse is useful as an anchor to Beijing's energy interests in the region. Nazarbayev described the importance of strengthening relations with China thus:

To ensure our independence and territorial integrity, we must be a strong state and maintain friendly relations with our neighbors, which is why we shall develop and consolidate relations of confidence and equality with our closest and historically equal neighbor – Russia. Likewise we shall develop just as confident and good-neighborly relations with the PRC [People's Republic of China] on a mutually advantageous basis. Kazakhstan welcomes the policy pursued by China for it is aimed against hegemonism and favors friendship with neighboring countries.<sup>111</sup>

The notion of Kazakhstan as a bridge transcending geographic regions and civilizations is presented as a justification for the country's multiple international engagements. Even though only approximately 10 percent of the territory is located in Europe, geographically defined, the official ideology is that of Kazakhstan being a Eurasian state – in its historical identity, its political orientations, and its

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<sup>111</sup> See "Kazakhstan 2030," The General Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan, <http://prokuror.gov.kz/eng/state/acts-president/strategy-kazakhstan-2030>.

economic interests. The European vector in that policy has gained impetus in recent years by the emergence of Europe as Kazakhstan's leading trade partner. The multiple foreign policy links are also seen as reflecting a unique domestic development process ongoing in the country. In Nazarbayev's words:

There are individuals who like to make a link between Kazakhstan and Europe; and there are those who also like to see Kazakhstan to be [closely tied to] the Asian 'Tigers;' still there are others who want to consider Russia as our strategic partner, while suggesting not to ignore the Turkish model for development. Paradoxically, they are right in their own way, since they have felt the issue from different angles. In reality, Kazakhstan as a Eurasian state that has its own history and its own future, would have a completely different path to travel down the road. Our model for development will not resemble other countries; it will include in itself the achievements from different civilizations.<sup>112</sup>

Overall, Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy, as reflected in its commitment in multilateral organizations as well as its bilateral relationships, has benefitted the country. The strategy has enabled the Kazakh leadership to build strong economic and political relations with multiple partners at a relatively low cost, without creating adversaries in international politics.

Whether this virtuous cycle of benign relations will continue, however, looks increasingly uncertain in view of Vladimir Putin's reinvigorated determination to re-integrate the post-Soviet space. Russia's creation of the EEU is a response to Western and EU influence in Eastern Europe and, similarly, to foreign, in particular Chinese, influence in Central Asia. As such, Putin's designs on Central Asia and Kazakhstan have presented a strong challenge to Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy model. To some extent, Astana's own policies have tilted the balance more strongly in favor of Moscow. A certain shift toward more heavily siding with Russia took place around 2011. Under the pressure of the Arab Upheavals (and the appearance of Western support for revolutionary changes of government in several North African and Middle Eastern countries) and the protests

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<sup>112</sup> Golam Mostafa, "The Concept of 'Eurasia': Kazakhstan's Eurasian Policy and its Implications," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 4 (2013): 164.

in Russia that briefly rocked Putin's regime, Kazakhstan and Russia found common ground in further accelerating the Eurasian integration project. It is, of course, imperative for Kazakhstan to maintain strong ties with Russia, but the latter's dominance has nonetheless put Kazakhstan's balanced foreign policy under greater constraints. Indeed, since Kazakhstan began voicing reservations on the increasingly political nature of the Eurasian Economic Union, Astana has become more proactive in pushing international, and particularly Western, alternatives in order to maintain, as far as possible, the balance in its foreign policy configuration.

Moreover, Russia's annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Ukraine have also put Kazakhstan in a delicate position. Thus far, Astana has managed to navigate this new geopolitical reality fairly well. In the UN General Assembly March 2014 resolution on the territorial integrity of Ukraine, which focused on Russia's annexation of Crimea, Kazakhstan abstained from voting. Although critical of subsequent Western sanctions against Russia, President Nazarbayev has nonetheless tried to put Kazakhstan's multi-vector strategy to use in the Ukrainian war. Calling for a resolution to the conflict, Nazarbayev has since its outbreak tried to play the role of peace-broker. Together with Belarus President Aleksandr Lukashenko, Nazarbayev launched a negotiation initiative that took off with a meeting in Minsk, and a second meeting was planned to take place in Astana. However, the Astana meeting never took place, as an agreement was made already at the Minsk meeting (known as the so-called Minsk process).

From early on, Kazakhstan's foreign policy – and its multilateral relations in particular – has expressed a clear logic: to establish the country as a reliable and constructive international actor. Astana has been keen to build a role as a respectable member of the international community; and one which can be a pragmatic partner with all quarters of the globe. The core of this strategy has been to create several foreign policy pillars – with Russia, China, the U.S., the EU, and Turkey – without prioritizing one too heavily over the other. The key balancing act has been to keep the house in order by not allowing any pillar to totally outweigh the others. The major challenge in recent years is that the Russian pillar has expand-



ed so heavily that the multi-vector strategy is less balanced than before. It is in this light that the West should understand the recent surge in international activities coming from Astana – from the admission to the WTO and ASEM to campaigns aimed at securing a seat at the UNSC and joining the OECD as well as trying to increase its visibility as a state by organizing global ventures, such as the upcoming Expo 2017. From this perspective, it is in the West's interests to support Kazakhstan's efforts to maintain the balance by further committing to engage with the country. These efforts should, not least, be welcomed in the light of an increasingly polarized and unfavorable geopolitical context.

It must be pointed out that Kazakhstan's ability to maintain a balanced foreign policy and pursuing multiple partnerships are both enabled and constrained by the presence of certain structural conditions. As Alexander Cooley has persuasively shown, multivectorism in Kazakhstan as well as the other Central Asian states was enabled by the emergence of a specific set of external factors connected to three major powers – China, Russia and the U.S. – present in the region during 2001-2011. The first was the U.S.'s decisive emergence in Central Asia after 9/11 and the security partnerships it formed with the regional states in the War on Terror. The second factor was China's dramatic economic expansion into the region coupled with Russia's retrenchment. The third and final factor was what Cooley labels Russia's weak "unite and influence strategy." The resulting multivectorism flourished in the region and lasted for ten years, during which Kazakhstan, as well as the small states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, were able to take advantage of external powers for enhancing their own interests.<sup>113</sup>

This situation has since changed following the drawdown of U.S. forces from Afghanistan and the region. Furthermore, with Russia's annexation of Crimea, its military aggression in the eastern regions of Ukraine, and the increasing institutionalization of Russia's influence in the region through the EEU, the geopolitical dynamics in the region have altered to the extent that maintaining external balances is already becoming a much greater challenge for Central Asia's leaders.

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<sup>113</sup> Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rulers*.

While China has indicated an intention to match Russia's efforts toward a greater engagement with the region, the West has decisively failed to do so.

For Kazakhstan's future external engagements and, indirectly, for its assertion of statehood, the key question is whether the golden era of multivectorism since the turn of the millennium represented a brief interlude in a more one-sided reliance on partnership with Russia, which existed in the 1990s and that may again be consolidating. The question can also be framed in the inverse: Whether we are currently witnessing a Russian-centric interlude in Kazakhstan's 25-year long process of emergence on the international scene – an interlude that will revert to the dominant trend, that is, to the continued strengthening of Kazakhstan's sovereignty and statehood.

What should be clear from this inquiry is that Kazakhstan has not abandoned its vision of a multi-vector foreign policy. In fact, it is seeking alternative external partners and avenues more persistently than ever. Yet Kazakhstan cannot do this on its own: its success in maintaining balance – and in the process keeping the heart of Eurasia open – will depend on the existence of partners willing to engage with the region, and reciprocate to Kazakhstan's overtures.

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