Preface by Ambassador (Ret.) Richard Hoagland

I first became acquainted with Central Asia when the State Department sent me in 1993 as a junior diplomat to our new embassy in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, to be the Public Affairs Officer. The new government in Tashkent had designated the former Communist Party Young Pioneers Headquarters building to be our embassy. When I arrived, our diplomatic mission was still so new that we didn't yet have adequate housing for the U.S. diplomats assigned to work there. And so, for the first six months I lived in a rustic cottage on the former KGB compound that the new government in Tashkent had offered to the U.S. embassy for temporary diplomatic housing.

I loved my job as the U.S. embassy's Public Affairs Officer in Tashkent because it required me to meet a good number of Uzbekistani citizens. There was only one hitch: the government of Uzbekistan *required* that we make such appointments through the Foreign Ministry, and they would then assign a "minder" (most certainly an intelligence officer) to be present at every meeting. We were constantly surveilled in other ways, too. I remember that at one banquet I attended, something fell from under the table where I was seated. I leaned down and picked up what I recognized as a listening device. I was so surprised that when a waiter who had seen what had happened came running up to snatch it away, I let him take it.

I continued my career with assignments, both in Washington and abroad, that focused mainly on the former Soviet Union. Twenty years after arriving in Tashkent, I arrived in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, as U.S. ambassador. Following that, I spent one year in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, as *Charge d'affaires*, or acting ambassador. And then in 2008, I arrived in Astana, Kazakhstan, as U.S. ambassador. Over the years, I had learned to see with my own eyes, but inevitably I still carried the baggage of U.S. policy with me.

Looking back, it seems to me that the relations between the now-independent nations of the former Soviet Union and the United States for the past 30 years have been fraught or, more bluntly, might be described as a sometimes nearly love-hate relationship. The one fundamental point that the United States, and the West in general, does not fully take into account is that the intellectual heritage of the former Soviet states is *not* the Western heritage that developed over centuries from the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment – the three great intellectual transformations that created the institutions, cultural values, political structures, and world view of the modern West.

Rather, I came to realize that the former Soviet states were the inheritors of the values of the Soviet and the earlier Russian Tsarist empires, with an unbroken line directly back to the Byzantine Empire. All of this overlays their own histories as Asian khanates and nomadic peoples. This "Byzantine-Soviet" worldview, especially, and its system of governance de-emphasized the importance of the individual and glorified the power of the state headed by an autocratic leader. During the Soviet period, this non-Western system established an unholy alliance of political leadership in the hands of the privileged few, a tolerance for and even a degree of acceptance of organized crime as an element of power, and powerful intelligence agencies to knit it all together. This system benefitted only a privileged few without the existence of any long-established institutions to challenge that power. To put it succinctly, this heritage, which continued to endure even after the collapse of the USSR, is radically different from the heritage of the West.

U.S. policy immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of sixteen new independent states was colored by an irrational exuberance that assumed, through Washington's rose-colored glasses, *of course* the peoples of the former Soviet Union were naturally yearning to breathe free and, with the appropriate assistance, would quickly become free-market democracies. Using the authorities of the 1992 Freedom Support Act – in which FREEDOM is one of those quirky Congressional acronyms that stands for "Freedom for Russia and Emerging Eurasian Democracies and Open Markets" – Washington dedicated hundreds of millions of dollars to support the former Soviet states as they

transitioned, over a relatively short time – or so assumed the Washington ideologues – from communism and central planning toward Western-type democracies and free markets. As we now know, it did not turn out to be as simple as transitioning from one ideology to another.

From the beginning, U.S. policy for the independent nations of the former Soviet Union has been remarkably consistent. Fundamentally – and this has never changed in thirty years – it has been to preserve and protect the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of each state in the region. From the beginning, this has included to support independent, sovereign states that uphold regional security, increase their economic integration with regional and global markets, and demonstrate respect for human rights and democratic governance, while not becoming sources of transnational threats to the United States or to any other nation.

Where we have too often gotten tangled up is in this part of the policy: "…demonstrate respect for human rights and democratic governance." This was especially true during the presidential administrations of both George W. Bush and Barack Obama, with first Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and then Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton. In the daily "sausage making" of foreign policy in the State Department, a geographic bureau usually has the initial responsibility to bring pen to paper. In the case of Kazakhstan, it is the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, known simply as SCA. However, other functional bureaus have the right to weigh in during the clearance process, as do other cabinet departments if they have interests in the key issue of policy being refined. After this rather complex clearance process, a policy memo goes to the regional bureau's Assistant Secretary of State who then passes it "up the chain" to the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs or to the Secretary of State him – or herself. One of these functional bureaus – the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, known as DRL — gained near veto power during that period.

A good number of the employees in DRL whom I encountered were civil servants who had never served as diplomats abroad and who had actually been hired directly from human-rights non-governmental organizations. I clearly

remember one who told me, "I'm so glad to have this job! Now I can impose *our* views on foreign policy," meaning the views of the human-rights organization from which she had come. Several of the DRL employees who had near veto power over our regular policy memos were especially irked by what they called Kazakhstan President Nazarbayev's "cult of personality." "Look what he's done now," they would say. "He's named a university after himself!" When I would point out that the capital of the United States is named after *our* first president and that nearly every city in the United States has a street named after George Washington, they'd rejoin haughtily, "But that wasn't until after he was *dead*!"

What, then, sets Kazakhstan apart from its neighbors? Wearing their ideological blinders, these kinds of people could not – or would not – focus on the larger picture, and this was certainly true of Kazakhstan. Soon after its independence, Kazakhstan emerged as the key country of Central Asia. Apart from the fact that a northwestern bit of Kazakhstan, across the Ural River, is technically on the European land mass, Kazakhstan, as it frequently insists, is indeed different from the other four, not because of its truly Eurasian geography but primarily because of decisions that President Nursultan Nazarbayev and his government made in the immediate months after independence. At least three are especially important.

First, Kazakhstan committed almost from the beginning to macro-economic reform away from the Soviet command-economy model, so that today its banking and other financial systems are on a par with Central Europe's. This means that Kazakhstan is much more deeply embedded in the global economy than the other four that still limp along with the tattered remnants of an outmoded command economy.

Second – and this is probably even more important – President Nazarbayev decided that if Kazakhstan were to be an independent country that emerges onto the world stage, it would need a new generation of leaders who think differently. And so he created the Bolashak Program (*bolashak* means *future* in Kazakh) that sent young Kazakhstani citizens abroad for full university educations and, for some, even graduate degrees. He established this far-sighted policy in the earliest days of independence even before Kazakhstan began to rake in the

wealth from its Caspian oil deposits. The result is that Kazakhstan now has a cohort of well over 10,000 alumni of the Bolashak Program, globalized young people rising in both the public and private sectors, who often speak English and other world languages. Today, when you go into any government office, university, think tank, or private business, inevitably you'll meet Kazakhstani men and women who say proudly that they are Bolashak Program alumni.

Third, and of special importance, Kazakhstan is an exemplary nuclear non-proliferation partner of the United States. At its independence, Kazakhstan found itself with the fourth-largest nuclear arsenal in the world, but President Nazarbayev committed the country to total denuclearization, in part because of the devastation that Soviet nuclear testing had inflicted on the land and population around Semipalatinsk in northeastern Kazakhstan. The decade-long U.S.-Kazakhstan effort to clean up the BN-350 nuclear fast-breeder reactor site at Aktau on the shore of the Caspian Sea reached a significant milestone in November 2010, when Kazakhstan finished securing and locking down under International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards at Baikal-1, near Semipalatinsk, 3,000 kg of weapon-grade plutonium and 10,000 kg of highly enriched uranium – enough to have made about 750 nuclear weapons. The year of the 10th anniversary of Kazakhstan's independence, 2001, coincided with the al-Qaeda attacks on the United States known simply as 9/11. All at once, America needed Kazakhstan in a way that it had not over the first 10 years of their interaction. Most important, we needed Kazakhstan to agree to what became termed the Northern Distribution Network, or simply NDN. This was the route from Europe through Russia and south into Afghanistan that would be used to supply U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan, *without charging transit fees*. Kazakhstan was not opposed to the NDN, but it wanted, quite naturally, to profit from it. Specifically, since there would be no transit fees, it wanted the United States to buy some of the supplies from its local Kazakhstani vendors, a not unreasonable request that, in fact, would have saved money in the long run. The Pentagon in Washington D.C. was the procurement agency for the supplies that would flow along the NDN. And there was the rub. Over many long years, the Pentagon had established densely bureaucratic and detailed requirements for the origin and quality of every single object it would procure and ship to the troops.

The job I had in the State Department at that time, Office Director for the countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia, put me and my team in charge of negotiating the NDN in Central Asia, specifically in Kazakhstan. When I first received this assignment, I thought it would be a no-brainer, because, of course, the good countries of Central Asia would want to help America uproot the terrorists in Afghanistan just to the south of them.

At the beginning, I'd thought that the NDN agreement with Kazakhstan would be a slam-dunk, and that I could then move on to negotiating the similar agreements we needed with other countries in Central Asia to support what became known as Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. But it didn't turn out to be as easy as I had first assumed. As I've already noted, Kazakhstan wanted the United States to procure *in Kazakhstan* some of what it needed. That's when I learned about the burdensome bureaucracy of my own government. For every single object we considered for procurement in Kazakhstan, not one quite met every single bureaucratic requirement. And the requirements for every single object often flowed densely in bureaucratic-speak over several pages. My colleagues in the Pentagon were sympathetic but said their hands were tied. And so after weeks of negotiation, we were deadlocked.

Exasperated, I told my senior colleagues at the State Department, the Department of Defense, and the National Security Council that the United States *had* to acquire something in Kazakhstan or else the NDN *would not happen.* And so the powers that be at that time relented and decreed that the United States would buy plywood from Kazakhstan. And indeed, that was enough to break the logjam. Kazakhstan had stood its ground but, in the end, accepted a symbolic gesture. And I never once subsequently heard any complaints from the U.S. military in Afghanistan that the Kazakhstani plywood was substandard. The NDN served as a crucial supply line until eventually Russia hardened its views about the ongoing presence of the United States and NATO in Afghanistan and closed down its portion of the NDN, essentially killing it.

Six years after this negotiation for the NDN, I was sworn in as U.S. Ambassador to Kazakhstan. One thing I had learned along the way is that people too often have an exalted view of the title, "ambassador." In fact, an ambassador is a go-

between, working hard behind the scenes to find the compromises that keep *both* sides reasonably satisfied.

At the independence of the former Soviet Socialist Republics as a result of the fall of the Soviet Union in December 1991, most observers expected that Uzbekistan would emerge as the leading country in Central Asia because of its large population and relatively high level of industrial development. But that did not happen because Uzbekistan's first leader, President Islam Karimov, kept Uzbekistan relatively isolated from its neighbors and mired in its Soviet past. Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev, however, undertook fundamental changes from the beginning of his tenure that internationalized his nation. Nearly 20 years later, he was eager to showcase that nation and its real achievements to the world. And when Kazakhstan gained the annually rotating OSCE Chairmanship in 2010, he insisted on hosting in his new capital, Astana, a relatively rare OSCE summit. Such events are a common part of international diplomacy, but this one, inevitably, became controversial in Washington.

The State Department's DRL bureau was not overly pleased with Kazakhstan because it had not quickly become a full-fledged free-market democracy after independence. Political opposition parties, when they were allowed to exist, were tightly controlled, and civil-society non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that the United States and the European Union supported were matched by government-created and, some said, subservient, NGOs, sometimes derided by DRL with the ironic acronym, GONGOs — government-organized non-government organizations.

To make matters yet more complicated, any high-level OSCE meeting, whether an exalted summit or "just" a ministerial, includes official side meetings by the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) for the host-country's NGOs and their international supporters. But President Nazarbayev decided that such meetings would not be part of his summit – only his GONGOs would be allowed to participate. After much contentious behind-the-scenes and often late-night multi-national negotiation, the compromise was finally reached that ODIHR could indeed have its traditional NGO meetings but *not* at the official summit site in Astana's New City. Instead, they would take

place several miles away at a university in the Old City. No one was really pleased, but the day was saved with compromise on *both* sides.

In the run-up to the summit, my job was to keep the Kazakh Foreign Minister up to date on the level of the U.S. participation in "Nazarbayev's Summit," as it was being called behind the scenes in Washington. I knew beyond any doubt that President Obama would not be travelling to Astana. But as for the name of the real senior U.S. government representative, I had to continue using the standard phrase, "It's still under discussion."

The Kazakhs were not at all pleased. As the date of the summit approached, they became increasingly exercised. With my fingers crossed behind my back, I continually responded, "It's still under discussion because of complicated schedules, but I assure you we will have very high-level representation." That polite diplomatic phrase usually elicited a scowl of exasperation.

In the end, DRL lost its hard-fought battle to get the U.S. government to boycott the OSCE summit in Astana. But it wasn't until her plane was actually in the air that I was finally informed in a middle-of-the-night phone call from Washington that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton would indeed represent the United States and was actually already on her way. President Nazarbayev was satisfied. And all went well. In fact, Secretary Clinton worked like a trooper late into the night holding what seemed to be an endless series of bilateral meetings with those representing their countries at the OSCE Summit. As often happens in the world of diplomacy, what you see in public is the ready-for-the-cameras final result that hides the hair-pulling and sleepless nights of high drama behind the scenes.

After thirty years of independence, Kazakhstan is a responsible player on the world stage. It has stayed true to President Nazarbayev's original intention: friendly to all, beholden to none. But as many like to say, it is located in a tough neighborhood and has to juggle the interests of its immediate neighbors, Russia and China, as well as those of the United States and the European Union and other lesser but important regional powers like Iran and Turkey. And Kazakhstan does so in a masterful fashion, employing what it calls a "multi-vector foreign policy." In this context, let us take a brief look at Kazakhstan's relations with Russia, China, and Turkey.

Russia has long declared its former republics to be its *special sphere of influence*, sometimes substituting "privileged" for "special." Because of history, economic ties, a colonial *lingua franca,* the Russified culture of the older elites, and because of a *tsunami* of propaganda on the Russian broadcast media that blanket the region, Moscow's near-absolute dominance there should be a foregone conclusion. But it's not.

Further, Russia regularly whispered into the ears of neighboring leaders a greatly exaggerated threat of the Islamic State and the Taliban. While the threat does indeed exist because of the ISIS declaration of a sub-caliphate of Khorasan in Afghanistan and its neighboring regions, including the southwest corner of Kazakhstan, the dire Russian admonitions purposely exaggerate the threat in order to impel the Central Asia states to turn more fully to Moscow for their security. This is ever more true with the military withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan.

Russia has created two multilateral structures for regional integration, and Kazakhstan is a member of both. The first is the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in which the members pledge to support and defend each other's mutual security. "Permanently neutral" Turkmenistan maintains only observer status. Despite annual summits and regular military exercises, the CSTO is still not seen as an especially effective organization, either by its members or more broadly in the greater Eurasian region. And whether it would respond in an emergency situation, is open to question. It is useful to note that during Kyrgyzstan's ethnic turmoil in Osh that began in June 2010, Bishkek asked for security assistance from the CSTO, but Moscow did not agree, noting that the CSTO exists to defend member states against *outside* aggressors.

The other, and more recent, Russia-dominated multilateral organization in the region is the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), comprising initially Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus, and now including Kyrgyzstan and Armenia. Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev first proposed the EEU in the 1990s, but Moscow tended to pooh-pooh it until Putin's third presidential term, when he apparently came to see it as potentially an effective tool of *putinism,* which some go so far as to dub *neo-sovietism.* Some suspect that Moscow sees the EEU as a

bloc structure – led by Moscow – that will inevitably take on a political dimension. So far, however, Kazakhstan has politely said *nyet* to any kind of political dimension – or, to go even further, a common currency – for the EEU.

Why does Kazakhstan take this stance? Principally, it's because its population, unlike the populations of the four other Central Asia states, is still just under twenty-five percent Slavic, concentrated largely in the northern part of the country bordering Russia and around the former capital, Almaty. It is especially the north that concerns Kazakhstan and why late in the 1990s Nazarbayev moved the capital of his country from Almaty to Brezhnev's "Virgin Lands" city of Tselinograd on the southern Siberian steppe, essentially in the middle of nowhere. He did so because, from the 1990s to this very day, influential voices in Russia (and not just the clownish Vladimir Zhirinovsky, himself born in Almaty) continue to call for the annexation of the northern third of Kazakhstan that some insist was always historically a part of Russia.

China is increasingly the looming elephant in Central Asia and deserves close observation. Its presence in the region has generally been politically benign as it has sought to gain access to the hydrocarbon and mineral wealth there to fuel its own economic growth. Even as China increasingly bought into the oil sector of Kazakhstan and the natural-gas sector in Turkmenistan (where it is the only foreign nation allowed to operate its gas wells and pipelines directly on Turkmenistan's sovereign soil), the West, including the United States, saw no problem, because there was no perceived political threat.

However, the West perked up its ears when China's President Xi Jinping announced at Nazarbayev University in Astana (now Nur-Sultan) in September 2013 its New Silk Road Economic Belt running from east to west across Central Asia, through the South Caucasus, and on to northern Europe. Initially, the United States, with its own New Silk Road Initiative of the early Obama administration (that, in reality, existed only on paper), paid little attention because the U.S. version of the New Silk Road focused on forging north-south links from Russia's southern border into India, whereas China's stated goal was to facilitate transport of its industrial production, especially from Western China, overland to Europe.

The Chinese plan is an essential part of Beijing's emergence on the world stage as a global player and goes far beyond Central Asia to include elements in Pakistan now known as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (from the Karakorum Mountains to the warm-water port of Gwadar), Southeast Asia, and maritime lanes through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean to all the littoral ports, including those of East Africa. By March 2015, China had released a comprehensive action plan for what it had by then come to call the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), emphasizing that it "is in line with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter. It upholds the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual nonaggression, mutual noninterference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence."

The initial U.S. view of China's New Silk Road Economic Belt was a rather simplistic shrug: "They do hardware; we do software," meaning that Beijing would probably focus on upgrading the east-west highways and rail lines along the southern rim of the former Soviet Union, while Washington focused on technical capacity-building for things such as customs modernization and border security. As China's BRI policy emerged, and as it began to buy up industries, initially in Kazakhstan, all the way from Xinjiang to the Black Sea, it became apparent that China was actually creating more of an industrial investment scheme, in part to stimulate economic growth among its western neighbors. Kazakhstan has willingly participated in China's BRI *when it is in Kazakhstan's interest to do so.* Because of its hydrocarbon wealth, it has not fallen into China's debt trap that some call "predatory lending." And Kazakhstan's close relationship with China has not been an issue in the U.S.-Kazakhstan relationship.

Separately from BRI, Kazakhstan is a member of the China-dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that plays a certain role in Central Asia, certainly more so than the Russia-dominated CSTO. For many years, the SCO was seen by outsiders (and even by some participants) as just one more international "talk shop." Over the years, however, the SCO has matured into a normal regional organization, and Washington has no problem with

Kazakhstan's membership in it. Interestingly, soon after the SCO was founded, member-state Uzbekistan recommended that the United States be granted observer status. Before the SCO could decide on this recommendation, however, Washington rejected the offer, ideologically unwilling to be associated, even as an observer, with an organization comprised of Russia, China, and "un-reformed" former Soviet states. This rejection was perhaps understandable but was short-sighted and typical of the sometimes rigidly ideological decision-making in Washington.

Turkey should have become a major player in Central Asia since four of the five nations there have a Turkic heritage – Tajikistan is the exception with its Persian heritage. Immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union, Turkey made a strong effort to become a major player in Central Asia. However, it overplayed its hand and was perceived as a state seeking domination, rather than offering to be a helpful partner. More recently, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has caused concern throughout the region with his occasional musings about the re-establishment of the Ottoman Empire. Kazakhstan, however, has found a way to pay symbolic tribute to Turkey and to Turkic culture by designating its Silk Road city of Turkistan as the current Spiritual Capital of the Turkic World (an honor that will rotate to other cities in other countries) and reorganizing its regional state university there as Khodja Ahmad Yasawi International Kazakh-Turkish University. As nearly always, Kazakhstan plays its cards to its own advantage.

Like all nations, Kazakhstan has important and mutually beneficial relations with multiple powers. And now, with the historic – and troubling – developments in Afghanistan, the United States is once again quietly increasing its interest in the region and looking to Kazakhstan to be ready to help, if help is needed. Washington seeks to be reassured that Nur-Sultan will help to manage, at least initially, flows of refugees from Afghanistan and, more broadly, prevent homegrown Islamic militant groups, especially in the Central Asian countries, from forging quiet links with the ideologically committed Taliban that would endanger the entire region.

The United States should rest assured that it has a steady partner in Kazakhstan. Personally, I am grateful that I had the opportunity to play a small role in helping to cement this important regional relationship. And I am certain that, despite Washington's internal ideological battles, it will continue to recognize Kazakhstan as a steady and reliable partner in a challenging global neighborhood.