

Chapter Six: Kazakhstan and the United States – Achievements and Challenges

Having presented this overview of the dramatic story of Kazakhstan-U.S. relations over the past three decades, one immediately asks what conclusions, if any, are warranted, and how these might affect future relations between these two countries.

Any sober reading of the past prompts one to acknowledge the great differences between them. Looming over all the rest is the stark fact that one country has a population of 18.5 million and the other 328 million. Even though Kazakhstan's territory is a third that of the United States, the differential in population is staggering. Added to this is the fact that the Republic of Kazakhstan is three decades old and the U.S. was founded thirty-five decades ago. Finally, there is the brute fact that while one country – America – is protected by two oceans, the other – Kazakhstan – has the longest border in the world with the Russian Republic and shares a border with the People's Republic of China that exceeds a thousand miles.

Such asymmetries are bound to affect relations between any two states presenting such contrasts. One obvious consequence of these differences is the difficulty which each state faces when seeking to understand the constraints facing the other. It is all too easy for Americans to underestimate the challenges that arise from Kazakhstan's long borders with major superpowers, just as it is not easy for Kazakhstanis to appreciate the extent to which America's complex federal and representative system presents challenges for decision-makers in

Washington, or the variety of factors that account for the interest of American politicians and citizens in matters relating to Kazakhstan's domestic governance. At various moments over the past decades these differing perceptions have led to misunderstandings in a variety of areas.

While this study enumerates the existence of contacts between Americans and Kazakhs dating back to the nineteenth century, historical factors in both countries meant that these earlier ties, such as they were, were known mainly to historians in both countries and not to their educated publics. Added to this is the fact that few Kazakhs had emigrated to the United States until very recent times, thus denying to both countries a link that might have fostered mutual understanding.

Against this background, the development of cordial and productive relations between the newly founded Republic of Kazakhstan and the United States is all the more remarkable. Not only did these links arise quickly after Kazakhstan's emergence as a sovereign state, but they have been successfully nurtured and expanded over the following thirty years. Simply to enumerate some of the main elements of this interaction is to appreciate the achievement on both sides of the relationship.

Thus, it is important to note that the Kazakhstani-American relationship was born not in the contentious world of geopolitics but in the very practical spheres of energy and nuclear arms. Even before the collapse of the U.S.S.R. Kazakhstan's leader and First President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, was in direct contact with Chevron's Richard Matzke, which led in 1993 to the signing by Ken Derr, CEO of Chevron, and President Nazarbayev of a contract for Chevron to develop Kazakhstan's vast Tengiz oil field. Meanwhile, the U.S. Secretary of State James Baker III had been in contact with President Nazarbayev over the fate of Kazakhstan's major uranium holdings and of the nuclear arms and related facilities on its territory.

Negotiations on both issues were complex and sustained, but in both cases the parties achieved understandings that benefited both countries and, significantly, the world at large. It is particularly notable that the Tengiz agreement included the development of a pipeline across southern Russia to export Kazakh oil to the Black Sea, and that the agreements that led to the nuclear disarmament of Kazakhstan also found favor in Moscow. On both issues the Kazakh and American negotiators showed themselves to be skilled and effective.

Equally notable is the manner in which Kazakhs and Americans have worked together to transform the basis of their relationship from nuclear and hydrocarbon issues to a diversified mix of modern developmental projects, the most recent of which is the joint development of Kazakhstani agriculture. This many-sided transformation, which is still ongoing, has brought both countries together in the development of new technologies in many fields, and in the training of Kazakhstan's young men and women in fields that scarcely existed a generation ago. Suffice it to say that just one Kazakhstan institution, the ten-year old Nazarbayev University, collaborates with a half dozen universities in the United States to develop new skills in many technical fields, including medicine.

Collaborations in the area of investments and business have challenged both countries to bring Kazakhstan's new legal institutions into line with generally accepted world standards. Progress at times has been slow, but the general direction is positive. Close collaboration between the two governments also facilitated Kazakhstan's entry into the World Trade Organization.

More complex for Washington has been such issues as the rights and duties of non-governmental organizations and issues concerning freedom of assembly in Kazakhstan. Even as differences remain, the level of mutual understanding has risen sharply, with an admonishing style

from Washington gradually giving way to more constructive interactions, and with Kazakhstan's officials ready to sit down with American counterparts to hammer out solutions.

If at times U.S. policies have influenced developments in Kazakhstan, so have Kazakhstani initiatives helped shape U.S. policies. A striking example of this the acceptance by the U.S. Department of State of Kazakhstan's proposal for the U.S. to establish a "C5+1" structure ("Central Asia Plus the United States") for regularized consultation on a regional basis. This breakthrough initiative would never have happened had a high level of trust not existed between Washington and Nursultan. Overall, this spirit of collaboration has generated a climate in which close interactions have arisen in areas far removed from politics and diplomacy, including music, art, dance, and film.

Nor have the two countries ignored their mutual security. Indeed, security cooperation is a key element in the Strategic Partnership between the countries, and has been so since the mid-1990s, when the first military exercises involving U.S. forces were held in Kazakhstan. Since then, the U.S. and NATO have assisted Kazakhstan in developing Kazbat, an elite airborne peacekeeping mission that, among other, saw service in Iraq from 2003 to 2008. The Stepp Eagle multinational exercises under NATO command take place yearly, and the two countries have also established cooperation on intelligence sharing as well as countering organized crime. Kazakhstan's security cooperation with the U.S. is a delicate matter given the country's membership in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization. But all the same, Kazakhstan has showed that these close ties with Russia, as well as China, are not an impediment to cooperation with the United States even in the most sensitive areas like military cooperation.

The extent and depth of interaction between Kazakhstan and the United States is built on the solid and very practical basis of their each recognizing the interests that link them. However, it would have never developed to the extent it has were it not for a number of more general factors. Indeed it is these, as much as the calculations of *Realpolitik*, that link them today.

First among these is leadership in both countries, and the climate of constructive engagement these have created and nurtured. President Nursultan Nazarbayev deserves great credit for this, as do his early American interlocutors, James Baker as well as Richard Matzke and Ken Durr of Chevron. Together they established at the outset of the two countries' interaction a cordial and productive climate.

When Kazakhstan's current president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, served as Foreign Minister he proposed for his country to maintain a "multi-vectored" or "balanced" foreign policy based on cordial relations with China, Russia, and the United States. In order to create this balance, Kazakhstan had to broaden and deepen its relationship not only with the United States but with the West generally. Washington acknowledged that this strategy was not only legitimate but essential if Kazakhstan was to maintain its sovereignty and independence. A series of dedicated ambassadors in both countries worked within this framework to expand productive interactions in spheres as diverse as business, law, finance, education, and research. These in turn greatly expanded the human links between the two countries.

Greatly facilitating this process was Kazakhstan's Bolashak program, which sent thousands of young Kazakh men and women to study in America, and the Kazakh decision to establish English-language training in all the country's schools. With the deepening of mutual understanding came the realization by Washington that Kazakhstan's emerging elite

truly shared the goal of an open and participatory system, but that constraints arising from Kazakhstan's geopolitical location mean that further progress, if it is to occur, must be gradual and without a blaze of publicity.

In this and other respects, one can conclude that the success of U.S.-Kazakhstan relations has been above all a process of mutual education. Yes, there have been many interstate agreements and, yes, there have been beneficial relations in business, education, and culture. But in the end, none of these can be considered ends in themselves, but rather separate elements in the process of building mutual knowledge and understanding that arises from life-based education. All of these have fostered what is surely the most important basis for mutual understanding. Thanks to able and steady leadership on both sides, this process has proceeded steady over three decades and is likely to continue apace in the coming years.

However, this is not to say that there does not remain much to be done. Today, Kazakhs are wondering about the extent and depth of America's commitment to the region of Central Asia as a whole following its departure from Afghanistan. Will Washington implement its positive strategy for the region as a whole, including Afghanistan, or will it seek to "pivot" elsewhere, pushing Kazakhstan and its neighbors onto the back burner?

Americans, meanwhile, worry that relentless actions by Kazakhstan's big-power neighbors may succeed in wearing down Kazakhstan's resolve, with the result that it is ever more deeply involved with their geopolitical projects, with the erosion of the country's cherished principle of balance.

They also depend on the two countries continuing to play a role coherent with the strategic approach of the other. Kazakhstan, thus, must continue

to strengthen its independence and serve as a constructive role on regional affairs, while also gradually reforming its political system to allow for greater participation and protection of civil rights. Similarly, the U.S. must continue to play the role assigned or it in Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy, which requires a certain level of American attention to and presence in the region – something that was challenged by the U.S. decision to withdraw from Afghanistan.

Neither of these issues will be resolved quickly or easily. This makes it all the more important that the process of mutual education continue apace in both countries.

Over the first three decades it is understandable that the leaders of both countries would have played the main role in this important process. But now Kazakhstan-U.S. relations depend ever more greatly on the sharing of information, mutual knowledge, and understanding.

To now, the media of both countries have scarcely been up to the task. Too few Americans have explained their thinking to audiences in Kazakhstan, while few, if any, respected but non-official writers and thinkers of Kazakhstan have addressed themselves to American audiences. If this were to change, the process of mutual education and mutual understanding would advance by leaps and bounds. Differences would be understood and respected, and solution more likely to arise on both sides. The development of mutual knowledge is thus the great challenge for the coming years, and the key to the next phase of what has been, over three decades, a positive and remarkable relationship.