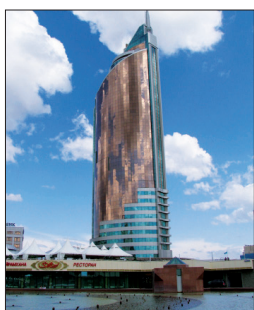


A vital and invaluable Western ally

KAZAKHSTAN IS PROVING AN IMPORTANT ALLY OF BOTH THE UNITED STATES AND EUROPE



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A reflection of its geography and its geology, Kazakhstan's foreign policy is of truly global reach: it conducts high-level diplomacy at the regional level, with its two large, powerful neighbours; and in an increasingly multi-polar world, it enjoys good relations with emerging economies such as India and Brazil, as well as the ASEAN nations. Equally importantly, Kazakhstan is also a key ally of the United States and the European Union, and as such an important friend of NATO.

The US was the first country to recognise Kazakhstan, in December 1991, and opened its Embassy in Almaty in January 1992. In the years since Kazakhstan's independence, the two countries have developed a wide-ranging bilateral relationship. US-Kazakhstani cooperation in security and non-proliferation has been a cornerstone of the relationship. Kazakhstan has signed the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty (1992), the START Treaty (1992), the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (1993), the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (2001). Although the events of September 11, 2001 brought about closer cooperation between Washington and Astana, the pair's relationship dates back to the first days of independence, when Kazakhstan asked the US to help dismantle and dispose of its nuclear arsenal, inherited from the Soviet era.

Aside from its participation in the US-led coalitions to combat international terror and its support of activities in Afghanistan and in Iraq, US help to plan for and train a modern military designed to meet Kazakhstan's defensive needs and to meet its international responsibilities has also strengthened bonds between the two countries. As the largest and most politically stable of the former Soviet republics in the region, Kazakhstan has also emerged as the key partner for NATO.

Kazakhstan joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme in 1995. This provided the country with invaluable experience and contacts with the military establishments of NATO members. NATO has utilised the PfP programme with Kazakhstan as a means of fostering greater integration of Central Asian states with Western political and military institutions. Kazakhstan agreed in January to allow NATO to ship non-lethal cargo through its territory, and Astana has become key to the US-led war in Afghanistan – especially given the ongoing instability in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, where

the US military leases an important airbase. Parallel to this process, Kazakhstan has developed close ties with the European Union.

From the earliest years of independence, European Union countries have been active in developing cooperation with Kazakhstan. Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, larger EU member states were quick to establish embassies in the country.

Following the adoption of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, there has been a noticeable increase in the tempo of high-level contacts between EU and Kazakhstani officials. Building on these initiatives, Kazakhstan has recently published the State Programme *The Path to Europe*. This is an ambitious set of policy proposals designed to transform the country over the coming years. The programme sets out a future path for the country based upon achieving European standards and building stronger links with the EU and individual European countries as the means to achieve modernisation.

For Brussels, Kazakhstan's tenure as head of the OSCE has given it the opportunity to play a leading international role and to help to move the organisation forward; it is also a chance to strengthen the European dimension of Kazakhstan's domestic and international politics and thereby to consolidate further the expanding EU-Kazakhstan relationship. The growing importance of Kazakhstan's relationship with the EU and the US has not been a one-sided affair. Indeed, in many respects it has been Kazakhstan that has been pushing for more substantial ties with the West. From the earliest years of independence, the Kazakhstan authorities have stressed the Eurasian character of the new nation-state – an acknowledgement of the 'European' social and political dimensions of the country's makeup, and which are shared by the US.

Washington and Brussels recognise Kazakhstan's accomplishments, in part through helping Kazakhstan play a greater role on the international stage, in institutions like the OSCE and at the UN, knowing that many of the policies Kazakhstan will advocate are also in their interests.

In this sense, Kazakhstan's hosting of the OSCE conference in Astana, the first such summit since 1999, is being seen by leaders in the EU and by the US as an invaluable opportunity to play a major role in setting the economic, military, and political agenda for the Eurasian region for the coming decade. **F**