

Countering nuclear proliferation

Action to develop a nuclear and terrorist-free world

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Speaking at the 66th General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2011, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev reaffirmed his country's leading role in combating nuclear proliferation, calling upon all countries to get rid of nuclear weapons and work toward a joint declaration for a nuclear-free world.

"We suggest starting the development of the universal declaration of a nuclear-free world. It is necessary to broaden the legal basis and to increase international control over countries' obligations in the non-proliferation sphere performed by the UN and the IAEA," he told delegates.

President Nazarbayev said that his country welcomed the treaty between the United States and Russia on stage-by-stage cuts in nuclear arsenals and added that it was important that all other countries of the "Nuclear club" joined this process.

"A paradoxical situation has arisen in the world. Some countries are allowed to have nuclear weapons and others are strictly forbidden even to develop them. This is not just, not proportional and not honest. These articles of international law should be reconsidered," the Kazakh leader said.

President Nazarbayev added that the responsibility of all nations to cut nuclear weapons and gradually destroy them should be increased, especially for those nations who actually possess such weapons.

"Today, the states that possess nuclear weapons provide no legal guarantees to the non-nuclear countries. The non-proliferation treaty is not working in this regard. At present, nuclear weapons are not a deterrent factor, but rather a catalyst for an arms race," President Nazarbayev said.

The Kazakh president stressed that universal control over nuclear weapons can now only be exercised by a collective body with broad powers, such as the UN Security Council. "I suggest that the international community approves a collective address to the countries that de-facto possess nuclear weapons with a call to give up all nuclear ambitions," he said.

After the Soviet Union collapsed, the international community anxiously waited to see what newly independent Kazakhstan would do with the thousands of nuclear weapons left on its territory. Had the country decided to maintain them, it would have become the fourth largest nuclear power in the world.

Thankfully, the country decided to disarm and the Soviet weapons were either destroyed or moved to Russia. The Semipalatinsk nuclear testing site in western Kazakhstan was closed, and all intercontinental ballistic missile silos were destroyed.

Over the following two decades, Kazakhstan has worked hard to prevent nuclear proliferation. It is a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Nuclear Suppliers Group. And in addition to its general IAEA membership, Kazakhstan has signed the IAEA Safeguards Protocol and signed and ratified the IAEA's Additional Protocol. Adherence to the Additional Protocol subjects all of Kazakhstan's nuclear facilities to strict and stringent IAEA oversight, including comprehensive declarations, reporting, and site-access obligations.

Together with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan established a nuclear free zone in Central Asia in September 2006, which prohibits it from possessing or attempting to possess nuclear weapons and from assisting or encouraging other nations to acquire them.

Uranium production

Kazakhstan's nuclear interests lie in providing the world with uranium, and has been an important source for more than fifty years. Kazatomprom, the national atomic company set up in 1997 and owned by the government, controls all uranium exploration and mining as well as other nuclear-related activities, including importing and exporting nuclear materials. It announced in 2008 that it aims to supply 30 per cent of the world's uranium by 2015, and through joint ventures: 12 per cent of the uranium conversion market, 6 per cent of enrichment, and 30 per cent of the fuel fabrication market.

As revenue generated by the uranium industry increases, money is being invested back into further improving the physical protection of domestic plants, internal control measures, the safeguarding of radioactive material, and the training of nuclear industry workers in the ethics of non-proliferation. Since the Soviet collapse, significant improvements have been achieved in all aspects of nuclear safety and security at Kazakh nuclear sites and facilities, mostly with the help of US-funded non-proliferation assistance programs. Due to cooperation with the IAEA, the most

sensitive facility – the Ulba Metallurgical Plant at Ust-Kamenogorsk – has the highest level of safeguards in Central Asia, which brings it close to Western standards. Although according to analysts, more resources should be channelled into nuclear security culture and non-proliferation education.

By participating in the Nuclear Threat Initiative's (NTI) proposed international fuel bank, the IUEC, and the US-sponsored Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (GNEP), Kazakhstan can contribute to limiting proliferation of full fuel-cycle technologies. It has been suggested that Kazakhstan could become a site for such a bank because of its nuclear infrastructure, strong non-proliferation record, and large Muslim population, making Kazakhstan perhaps a more appealing host from the perspective of non-Western countries. Russia's IUEC is complimentary to GNEP, which seeks to expand the use of nuclear energy while decreasing the risk of proliferation and addressing the challenge of nuclear waste disposal.

Kazakhstan's ambitions are likely to be realized if uranium prices stay high and Kazatomprom is successful in further expanding its international partnerships. Kazatomprom's most immediate task is to secure customers for its final nuclear fuel product--fuel assemblies, an extra fuel fabrication stage which Kazatomprom plans to start carrying out domestically. Having a nearly complete nuclear fuel cycle, save for enrichment, will ensure a stable cash flow for Kazatomprom and limit its dependence on the fluctuating market price of raw uranium.

In the meantime, increased uranium sales will help alleviate the country's overdependence on oil exports and help modernize its nuclear sector. If Kazakhstan does become the world's leading uranium and nuclear fuel supplier, the ramifications for the country both in terms of increased gross domestic product and status on the world stage will be profound.


Countering terrorism

This year saw Kazakhstan join the list of the world's countries directly affected by Islamic terrorism, following a handful of bombings and terrorist attacks. Now, following new legislation passed in October, the security forces are stepping up their anti-terror efforts. "There is a growing risk of inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflict. The threat of a new onslaught of international terrorism remains high," Nazarbayev told Parliament on September 1, 2011 ahead of the bill being passed. He outlined the changes to legislation covering national security and religious affairs, stressing that amendments would not be aimed at "prohibiting freedom of conscience. "It is about protecting the state from religious extremism," President Nazarbayev stressed.

Historically, Kazakhstan has virtually no tradition of radical Islam, and this is the first time it has faced a threat from home grown extremists. Analysts also highlight the far from random target of the attack: the city of Atyrau. Located in the west of the country, not far from the tinderbox of the North Caucasus, Atyrau is the "capital" of the thriving district that includes the Tengiz and Kashagan oil fields. It is also the base for the offices of major foreign companies operating in Kazakhstan: among them Eni, Chevron, ExxonMobil and Tengizchevroil.

The legislation passed in October requires the re-registration of all religious organisations, the banning of the practice of naming mosques after those who funded them, and analysis of what every religious group is teaching. The President has also called for measures dealing with illegal mosques.

The general prosecutor's press office said it has monitored more than 10,000 websites and has blocked 51 that contained extremist information and endangered national security. At the same time, Kazakhstan will increase its counter-terrorism spending to US\$91.6m in 2012, a 23.5 per cent increase from 2011.

The Government says that it is planning to use these funds to acquire military and special equipment, artillery, personal body armour, firearms, ammunition, mobile communications systems and special off-road vehicles and to purchase and overhaul aircraft. 

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The production of uranium pellets for nuclear power at at Ulba Metallurgical Plant in Kazakhstan's eastern town of Ust-Kamenogorsk

