

# A dynamic relationship

By **H.E. DR CAROLYN BROWNE**

AMBASSADOR OF THE UNITED KINGDOM TO THE REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN



**CAROLYN BROWNE** holds a degree in Microbiology from Bristol University and a DPhil from the University of Oxford. Dr Browne joined the FCO in 1985 and has served in Moscow, New York and Brussels. From 2000-2002 she was Head of the Human Rights Policy Department, FCO, and from 2005-2006 was senior adviser to the Director of International Security. From 2007-2011 she served as Her Majesty's Ambassador to the Republic of Azerbaijan. Dr Carolyn Browne took up her appointment as Ambassador to Kazakhstan in 2013.

It is twenty-four years since Kazakhstan emerged as an independent, sovereign state onto the world stage. But this year is also the 550th anniversary of something more fundamental – the formation of a distinct and self-conscious identity as the Kazakh nation. Later this year all over Kazakhstan there will be celebrations for the first time to mark that date in history when the various Kazakh tribes came together in alliance to defeat a common enemy.

This year should also mark a new level of dynamic development in the bilateral relationship between the United Kingdom and Kazakhstan. We see Kazakhstan has having an enormous potential – indeed, Kazakhstan is one of about two dozen countries in the world identified by the British Government as being an emerging power. I should stress that last word – of course Kazakhstan is also an emerging market. But it is that wider scope – the ability of influence events beyond its immediate region – which underlies that designation as an emerging power.

And it is for that reason that the last few years have seen a quickening of the pace of development of the bilateral relationship. In June 2013 Prime Minister Cameron became the first ever serving British Prime Minister to visit the country. He spent his first day in Atyrau, Kazakhstan's oil capital in the extreme West of the country, meeting some of the hundreds of British firms which are helping develop Kazakhstan's oil and gas resources and which make up fully 70 per cent of the country's exports at present. He then travelled to Astana where he and President Nazarbayev agreed to take the bilateral relationship to a new level by signing a Strategic Partnership which identifies a number of priority areas for greater cooperation going forward. Since then there has been a veritable stream of high level visitors from both sides – promoting trade and investment, exploring links between scientific communities, exchanging best practice on management, economic and financial skills, exploring collaboration over secondary, tertiary and vocational training and education, debating the tough foreign and security policy questions of today's inter-connected world, discussing international standards and norms – for example, on how best to ensure the highest possible judicial standards or cooperating in the face of threats such as cyber crime, illegal flows of drugs and people, and religious extremism.

Even more importantly, the last two years have seen a step-change in the number and quality of non-official links – students, tourists, families and individuals, businessmen and those travelling for fun – exploring each other's societies, listening to each other's experiences, marveling at each other's unique circumstances. Last year saw the first ever visit to Kazakhstan by a leading British cultural institution – the Globe Theatre. Proof, if that were needed, that Hamlet is welcomed and enjoyed far, far beyond the confines of one Western European country. There will be many more such land mark visits to come in the next few years.

One of the reasons why this bilateral relationship is accelerating is the launch last year of two factors which go a long way to help encourage such people-to-people links. The first is the establishment of direct air links between London and both Astana and Almaty. It is particularly gratifying that this being carried out by two companies which are either British, or embody significant British expertise and experience. The first is British Airways which provides direct flights between London and Central Asia's largest city, Almaty. And the second is Kazakhstan's premier national airline, Air Astana in which BAe is a 49 per cent share holder. They provide direct flights between London and Astana, Kazakhstan's new and dynamic capital in the north of the country. For the first time, it is now possible to fly direct from the UK to the heart of Eurasia – as Kazakhstan describes its location.

The second factor which helps encourage greater contact between our two countries is the streamlining or abolition of the visa requirement. With visa-free access under certain circumstances available to British citizens wanting to visit Kazakhstan, and from the British side a network of visa application centres across Kazakhstan plus the introduction last December of a premium, "fast track" visa service for Kazakhstani citizens wanting to visit or study in the UK, it has never been easier to visit each other.

If you wanted any further incentive to do so, consider the extraordinary growth in different British businesses from a wide range of sectors now exploring opportunities to trade and invest in Kazakhstan. The first ever meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission, which was set up when Prime Minister Cameron visited in 2013, took place last November

in Astana when Lord Livingston, the UK Minister of State for Trade and Investment, visited Kazakhstan. Lord Livingston was accompanied by a large delegation of business leaders representing the breadth of UK expertise, keen to explore new opportunities.

Or consider the way in which scientific collaboration has developed in the last twelve months. In 2014 the British and Kazakh governments launched a five-year, £20 million fund – the “Newton – Al Farabi joint partnership programme”. Through this programme, the UK will use its strength in research and innovation to promote economic development and social welfare of partner countries. I’m delighted that Kazakhstan is one of 15 countries selected worldwide to be such a partner with us.

Kazakhstan used to be seen in the UK primarily as a globally important oil-and-gas commercial opportunity – but not much more than that. Those days are gone for good. Today, the British business engaged in Kazakhstan is as likely to be involved in infrastructure, design, engineering, project management, retail, health, education, mining, financial and legal services, new technology and renewables (to name but a few sectors) as it is to be an oil-and-gas firm. And increasingly Kazakhstani firms, expertise and investments too are coming to the UK.

We should expect to see more of this, particularly in the run-up to EXPO 2017 – “Future Energy” which will take place in Astana. I’m delighted to say that various aspects of the EXPO infrastructure, management and expert input are being carried out by British firms, many of which were involved in the London Olympics of 2012. Of course leading British involvement in the oil and gas sector, too, continues. Shell and BG remain key long-term investors in Kazakhstan, as part of the Kashagan and Karachaganak consortia respectively. There are also over a hundred UK companies working in the energy sector in Kazakhstan, playing vital roles and providing key skills in the supply chains of all the major developments in this country. They bring with them the technical skills and expertise learnt in the harsh conditions of the North Sea.

One of the key factors which help to drive this dynamic relationship is the Kazakhstani Government’s commitment to overhauling and updating its legislation, systems and standards so as to meet the highest international standards. That’s key to its future prosperity, since in today’s increasingly inter-connected world those who succeed are those who can best attract international capital, know-how, and human talent. I particularly welcome Kazakhstan’s determination to join the WTO in the near future – hopefully, later this year. That, together with the agreement in principle now reached with the European Union on next-generation trade and cooperation arrangements should help send a very clear signal that Kazakhstan is open for business more than ever before.

A politically re-energised relationship, high level visits between the two Governments set to continue for the future, direct flights between capitals, lower or no visa requirements, a shared sense of ensuring that barriers to trade must be progressively lowered, a determination to succeed in an increasingly interconnected world and a well educated younger generation inspired to do so – these are some of the reasons why the bilateral relationship is growing faster than ever before.

In 1558, a merchant-venturer called Antony Jenkinson of the Muscovy Company became the first recorded British businessman to reach what we would now call Kazakhstan. It’s good to think that, over 450 years later, his legacy is alive and well and flourishing into the 21st Century.

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President Nursultan Nazarbayev and British Prime Minister David Cameron meet workers from the Bolashak oil plant near Atyrau, western Kazakhstan

