

Kazakhstan's strategic role

COLONEL BOB STEWART DSO MP

CHAIRMAN OF THE ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP FOR KAZAKHSTAN



BOB STEWART is the current Member of Parliament for Beckenham, first elected in 2010. He is a former British Army officer and, in 1992, was the first United Nations Commander of British Forces in Bosnia. He holds a degree in International Politics and Strategy from the University of Wales, and sits on the House of Commons defence select committee. Stewart has written two books, the bestseller *Broken Lives* and *Leadership Under Pressure*.

Kazakhstan is massive. The whole of Western Europe could fit into the country. As the World's largest landlocked state, it stretches from the Caspian Sea to China. Over 18 million people live in Kazakhstan, but spread across its vast lands there would only be 6 of them per square kilometre.

In 1991, Kazakhstan was the last former Soviet Republic to break from the Soviet Union. Shortly thereafter the United Kingdom and independent Kazakhstan began a direct bilateral relationship which is now 25 years old, and worth celebrating, which is the purpose of this edition of *FIRST*.

Since its independence, Nursultan Nazarbayev has effectively ruled the country. Now 77 years old, Mr Nazarbayev was first elected President of independent Kazakhstan immediately after the break with the Soviet Union in 1991. Practically unopposed, President Nazarbayev has won four more elections since then.

The President is popular with ordinary Kazakhs and is credited with successfully presiding over political, economic and social changes during the 1990s, as well as deserving the credit for some impressive economic growth since 2000.

Clearly, President Nazarbayev retains a tight rein on power. In fairness, he argues that building a Western-style democracy is a long-term goal for Kazakhstan but that change must be gradual so as not to destroy the stability of the country. That does make pragmatic sense to me, considering the situation in some surrounding countries.

I believe Kazakhstan is doing its very best in a region where good governance is hardly endemic. After all, Kazakhstan is no different to countless other states around the World – most of whom are considered by the United Kingdom to be both friendly and good trading partners.

It is excellent that Kazakhstan now has a well-deserved seat on the Security Council of the United Nations for this year and next. Over the last few years it has proved its right to be there too.

The country has a very good record in encouraging non-proliferation and disarmament. It hosted two rounds of negotiations on the Iranian Nuclear Programme, and mediated in talks on Syria and Ukraine. The country has also initiated the establishment of a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in Central Asia. The Treaty was signed on September

8 2006, in Kazakhstan. From a purely British viewpoint it gave invaluable help to the British government during the withdrawal of our forces from Afghanistan.

In 2009, it was Kazakhstan which initiated the adoption of the UN resolution, declaring 29th August as the *International Day against Nuclear Tests*. The state has also closed a nuclear test site, which was the legacy of the Soviet Union. To me that all adds up to be an impressive record.

Oil is dominant in Kazakhstan's economy. It provides a very large source of foreign investment, government revenues and employment. Kazakhstan is the 17th largest oil producing country in the World and has the 12th largest proven reserves of oil too.

It was booming oil prices which sustained Kazakhstan's strong growth from 2000-2007 when the Global Financial Crisis hit. GDP per capita – a measure of living standards – rose by 89 per cent in real terms over those years. However, growth slowed in 2008 and 2009 but it picked up again in 2010. The World Bank notes that these rising income levels have led to rapidly falling levels of poverty, which is excellent news.

Our Prime Minister, then David Cameron, visited Kazakhstan's capital, Astana, and the Kashagan oilfield on the Caspian Sea in June 2013, taking with him representatives from thirty British businesses. It was billed as the beginning of a new strategic partnership with the United Kingdom.

Since then President Nazarbayev has also visited the UK, holding talks with the Prime Minister in 10 Downing Street. The President and David Cameron discussed Russia and Ukraine. On Syria, they considered the vital importance of finding a political solution to the conflict. And concerning Da'esh, the Prime Minister and President agreed violent Islamist extremism posed one of the most significant threats to our generation, and that comprehensive efforts to defeat it must be made. Talking of Afghanistan, the two leaders agreed that rebuilding the economy would be a key guarantor of the country's future stability. Kazakhstan is clearly playing a full and responsible part on the world stage and most certainly shows why it should be a Security Council member.

After the meeting, the then Prime Minister, David Cameron announced that the two leaders had secured 40 deals worth £3 billion. The biggest of these was a memorandum of understanding with Kazakh state firm KazTransGas on the construction of a 1500km gas pipeline as well as four power plants in Kazakhstan.

As a Member of Parliament with a special interest

in Defence, I am particularly wanting to foster a bigger military relationship with Kazakhstan. To that end I am pleased by efforts so far. These include:

- English language training for military officers.
- Career courses in the UK and Peacekeeping courses with the British Military Advisory Training Team based in the Czech Republic
- Support to the programme of professionalisation of the Kazakh Armed Forces
- British participation in KADEX, the Kazakhstan Defence Exhibition.

I would very much like to see military cooperation become much greater. For instance, further Kazakh officer cadets could be trained at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst and at RAF College at Cranwell.

True, Kazakhstan is not a democracy in the precise way we experience it, but it is one in its own manner. Of course, we should support the country to evolve its own form of democracy even further. This will take time and President Nazarbayev is sensible to take his time and get it right. But, based on what is already happening, slowly the country will get there. Kazakhs must choose themselves how they wish to be governed, and they will. Clearly, political, economic, social and indeed military links between both the UK and Kazakhstan will help us to understand one another better, and to prosper greatly in so doing.

The first 25 years of a bilateral relationship between the UK and Kazakhstan has shown the way. The next 25 years should be even better. The future for Kazakhs-British relations is bright. **E**

It is excellent that Kazakhstan now has a well-deserved seat on the Security Council of the United Nations

President Nazarbayev and Prime Minister Theresa May, at the G20 Leaders Summit in Hangzhou, China



President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan meets with Her Majesty the Queen at Buckingham Palace

