

## The Origins of U.S.-Kazakhstan Relations and the Biden Administration

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Remarks to KIMEP University Global Leadership Forum  
25 February 2021, via Zoom

I am honored to be with you. I wish I could have joined you in person. In February 1992 I came to beautiful Alma-Ata and stayed for three-and-one-half years. I was privileged to be present at the modern creation of your great country.

Let me first say a word about a hero, Dr. Chan Young Bang. In 1990 President Nazarbayev created an economic advisory council with global experts. Dr. Bang was its Vice Chair. In 1992 Nazarbayev sponsored the creation of a Western-style business school. Dr. Bang founded it and gained international renown as KIMEP's leader. Rarely in life can one person have such a positive impact on so many others.

Today I will reflect on the origins of U.S. relations with Kazakhstan. Much of what happened in the early years remains relevant today. Many Biden Administration policies may have roots in the early directions of U.S.-Kazakhstan relations.

There may be differences between policies of the Biden and Trump Administrations. Let me highlight two.

First, President Biden is less keen than was President Trump on global **fossil fuel development**. And Biden is boosting U.S. support for climate change goals, including those in the 2015 Paris Agreement. It is unclear, however, whether Biden will be less supportive of Caspian energy development or of American companies engaged there.

A second difference with Trump is Biden's emphasis on international **human rights and democratic development**. He has said nothing about Kazakhstan, but comments on Russia may be indicative. On 23 January, the Biden Administration "condemned the use of harsh tactics against protesters and journalists" in Russia. On 4 February, Biden said "the days of America's rolling over in the face of Russia's aggressive actions," such as "poisoning of its citizens, are over." On 19 February at the Munich Security Conference, Biden said, "We must stand up for democratic values ... to meet the threat from Russia."

Earlier this month the West welcomed the dropping of charges against several Kazakhstani NGOs which monitor media, rights, and elections. The Biden Administration will pay careful attention to these kinds of issues. Human rights defenders such as Yevgeny Zhovtis are known and respected in Washington.

Now let me turn to the **early years**. Before coming to Kazakhstan, I spent many years dealing with issues of Soviet nuclear and space arms. I knew of Kazakhstan's role in their testing and deployment.

From 1988 through 1991 I participated in U.S.-Soviet arms control negotiations in Geneva. But more consequential events were taking place in Moscow. After the attempted putsch in August 1991, there was a lot of talk about strains in the Soviet system and **pressures that might pull it apart**.

In fall 1991, Moscow Mayor Gavriil Popov told U.S. Secretary of State James Baker that some likely new republics could live on their own, but others could not. Former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze voiced to Baker a concern that within a decade Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia could be a problem unless its countries joined a new union with Russia. Both were wrong. All the new states have lived on their own, and Islamic fundamentalism did not sweep Central Asia.

In the early years it was clear that **national consciousness** in Kazakhstan was strong. The mistaken appointment in 1986 of Gennady Kolbin as First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan should have taught the Kremlin a lesson.

The advent of independence at the end of 1991 surprised some in Kazakhstan, but the country was not wholly unprepared. The December 1986 Zheltoksan protests, the emergence in 1989 of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk movement, and the closure of the Polygon in 1991 had caused many Kazakhstanis to doubt the wisdom of remaining subservient to Moscow.

In the early years, it was evident to foreign diplomats that many Kazakhstanis embraced independence and new freedoms. Their country was no longer a victim of Soviet repression. Kazakhstanis appeared keen to control their lives and their country.

Kazakhstanis rightly worried about **risks of Russian intervention**. In August 1991 Nazarbayev wisely opposed the attempted putsch, but risks remained. In fall 1991, President Yeltsin warned that ethnic Russian-dominated parts of Kazakhstan and Ukraine could not secede from Russia. Fortunately, he never acted on this warning. This is a credit to his democratic leadership despite pressure from revanchists.

Nazarbayev ably piloted Kazakhstan to independence while ensuring its territorial integrity. He prudently cooperated with Moscow when possible, and he did not unduly antagonize it. This helped provide a stable climate for the development of Kazakhstan's sovereignty.

In September 1991 **President Bush** set forth five principles to guide U.S. policy toward the dissolution of the USSR. Two were most important for Kazakhstan. Bush called for peaceful self-determination consistent with democratic values, and for respect for existing borders.

At the outset America gave, and it still gives, strong support to Kazakhstan's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. This backing helped U.S.-Kazakhstan relations in the early years to become close and productive, and they have remained so. The Biden Administration will likely seek to continue this momentum.

In his memoir, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, Baker speaks of **Kazakhstan as an early priority**. In September 1991, Baker flew to Alma-Ata and discussed Bush's principles with Nazarbayev. In turn, Nazarbayev explained how on nearly every side Kazakhstan was surrounded by great powers. He said the U.S. could help ensure its peace and stability.

In December 1991, Baker again flew to Alma-Ata. Nazarbayev told him of the complex maneuvering to create a new post-Soviet Commonwealth. Baker raised two issues, the **Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty** (NPT) and potential U.S. humanitarian and technical aid.

According to Baker's memoir, Nazarbayev said that if the "international community recognizes and accepts Kazakhstan, we will declare ourselves a nonnuclear state." Nazarbayev said he would welcome Western expertise to help transform the economy.

Kazakhstan made important **early economic reforms** in such areas as market pricing, creation of a central bank and government budget, and steps to attract foreign investment. Later Kazakhstan wisely moved toward a flexible exchange rate. The economy remains burdened, however, by excessive oligarchic economic control. Much of it is linked to concentrated political power.

Of special importance was the early development of laws, regulations, and policies to **attract foreign energy investment**. The Tengiz deal was signed with Chevron in 1993 and now includes ExxonMobil. Tengiz was the first huge project with foreign participation anywhere in the former Soviet space.

Tengiz is the most productive Eurasian energy asset of the last quarter-century. It is now undergoing one of the world's largest expansions of any single energy project. Kashagan got off to a slow start but is now producing. Investments at Tengiz, Kashagan, and Karachaganak have brought Kazakhstan enormous benefit.

In the early years, another top U.S. priority in Kazakhstan was denuclearization. The U.S. backed Russia's becoming the legal successor to the USSR as a nuclear-armed state under the NPT. The U.S. and the West urged Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine to cede their nuclear weapons to Russia and become nonnuclear weapon states.

In early 1992, I had detailed discussions on nuclear arms matters with Nazarbayev and State Counselor Tulegen Zhukeyev. They understood the broad international support for nonproliferation, and the advantages of eliminating nuclear weapons from Kazakhstan. They were also aware that vital energy and economic cooperation with the West could be impeded if nuclear issues became a sore point.

Any effort to retain nuclear weapons and the over one hundred SS-18 intercontinental ballistic missiles based in Kazakhstan would have created security dangers and, over time, safety risks. Having experienced Soviet nuclear testing at Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstanis seemed painfully aware of nuclear risks.

On 19 April 1992, Baker called Nazarbayev. Baker said that in 1968 in the context of NPT negotiations, the U.S. had pledged to seek United Nations Security Council assistance if any nonnuclear weapon state were threatened by a nuclear power. Baker said the U.S. would repeat this pledge with respect to Kazakhstan.

Nazarbayev thanked Baker and said he hoped the “special relationship” between the two countries would continue. Nazarbayev cautioned that “if Russian chauvinism is not checked blood may be shed, civil war may develop, all reforms may go up in smoke, and Kazakhstan may become involved.”

On 16 May two days before he was to meet with Bush in Washington, Nazarbayev called Baker and said Kazakhstan had received a collective security guarantee from Russia. This combined with the U.S. NPT security pledge would enable Kazakhstan to join the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) and to adhere to the NPT as a nonnuclear weapon state.

On 18 May at the White House with Bush, Nazarbayev announced that Kazakhstan would sign **the START Protocol**. Under it, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine agreed to return nuclear weapons to Russia. Days later in Portugal, Zhukeyev signed the Lisbon Protocol on behalf of Kazakhstan. Representatives of other states did likewise.

In January 1993, Bill Clinton was elected U.S. President. He, Vice President Al Gore, Secretary of State Warren Christopher, and Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott continued the momentum in U.S. relations with Kazakhstan. In his memoir *In the Stream of History*, Christopher emphasized that the well-being of Kazakhstan and other former Soviet states was of “utmost importance to America.”

In return for Kazakhstan’s steps to reduce nuclear risks, the U.S. helped Kazakhstan eliminate its nuclear weapons and associated infrastructure. Largely to these ends, in October 1993 Christopher visited Almaty. Gore followed with a visit in December 1993 during which Parliament endorsed adherence to the NPT.

In February 1994, Nazarbayev again visited Washington. He and Clinton signed the important **Charter on Democratic Partnership** between the United States and the Republic of Kazakhstan. Zhukeyev, along with senior Foreign Ministry officials Vyacheslav Gizzatov and Bolat Nurgaliyev, were driving forces behind this initiative. The Charter outlines goals which remain relevant today.

Kazakhstan has earned global respect for its **responsible nonproliferation policies**. The most recent manifestation is the hosting of the IAEA's Low Enriched Uranium Bank. It is vital as a supply of last resort for IAEA Member States. The Biden Administration will continue to value Kazakhstan's historic contribution to nonproliferation.

Another area in which Kazakhstan has earned wide respect is its policy of **tolerance**. The wise Abai encouraged "prudence in thought and deed." In the early years, habits of tolerance -- ethnic, national, and religious -- helped Kazakhstan heal wounds from the Soviet era, and preserve its sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity.

A new study sponsored by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung has found that common civic identity in Kazakhstan now overwhelms ethnic and sub-ethnic divisions. This is a welcome sign of growing civic consciousness.

For a country with as much diversity as Kazakhstan, support for ethnic, national, and religious tolerance was the right choice. In the early years, some nationalists pressed for policies that would have further disadvantaged non-Kazakh populations. Fortunately, these sentiments did not dominate state policy.

Policies of moderation helped Nazarbayev gain international support. In October 1992 at the United Nations, he proposed the creation of a **Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia**, or CICA. Some in the West at the time criticized the proposal because it lacked a human rights component. But CICA promoted dialogue and cooperation for security and stability in Asia. Today it has over 30 members and observers, a striking accomplishment for a country so new to modern international diplomacy.

This leadership helped Kazakhstan play other important international roles. It became the first former Soviet state to chair the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Kazakhstan was the first Central Asian state to become a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

The Biden Administration may well look to Kazakhstan to continue and strengthen its leadership. International receptivity may depend in part on **democratic progress**, which thus far has eluded Kazakhstan.

For many years, Belarus and Kazakhstan seemed politically quiet and their peoples appeared to accept authoritarian rule. Belarusians have now broken out of this mold with a

large-scale popular uprising. Continued dictatorship there may depend on whether Minsk and Moscow apply increasing amounts of force.

Belarus has many democratic neighbors, whereas Kazakhstan is surrounded mostly by authoritarian regimes. This can hinder democratic development. At the same time, Kazakhstanis have been transformed by better living standards, by travel, study, and work abroad, and by civil society development. Today Kazakhstanis may have higher expectations for freedoms and productive careers than did their forebearers.

In many post-Soviet countries, including Kazakhstan, disgust with **corruption** seems to be rising. In Russia, this may be seen in the over 100 million YouTube views of Aleksey Navalny's video on Putin's Black Sea palace. It may also be seen in the frequency and geographic diversity of street protests in Russia. Since March 2019 protests in Kazakhstan appear to have become more frequent.

As this review has highlighted, some of Kazakhstan's current policies and directions took root in the early years. They include denuclearization, Caspian energy development, concern about Russian intentions, tolerance, international leadership, economic reform, national consciousness, and the nature of the political system.

But not all current issues have roots in the early years. One is the rise of China and its economic dynamism. Cooperation with China is essential to Kazakhstan's economic growth and security. At the same time, repression of Kazakhs and other Muslims in Xinjiang has become an international crisis. Some Kazakhs have courageously exposed the horrors.

In sum, **U.S.-Kazakhstan relations** in the Biden era are likely to remain close and productive. But the quality of relations could depend in part on the extent of progress in expanding economic and political freedoms and in making governance more responsive.

Thank you.