

Looking Forward: Kazakhstan and the United States

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Note: This report was prepared by a team of six authors, three from Kazakhstan and three from the United States. With support from their respective institutions, as well as the Embassy of Kazakhstan in the United States, the authors worked as a group, reaching consensus on all elements of the report that follows. Members of the team included Professor Bulat Sultanov, director of the Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan; Dr. Askar Nursha of the Institute of the World Economy and Politics; and Dr. Fatima Kukeyeva of the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University; Dr. S. Frederick Starr and Dr. Svante E. Cornell of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at SAIS, Johns Hopkins University; and Mr. S. Enders Wimbush of StrateVarious, LLC.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

Notwithstanding Kazakhstan's entrance into the Eurasian Economic Union and a growing perception of American disengagement from Central Asia (both discussed below) the major finding of this report is that the strategic objectives of the Republic of Kazakhstan and of the United States today are mutually compatible and even mutually reinforcing. Indeed, each country needs the other in fulfilling its goals. We therefore recommend that, to the greatest extent possible, both sides focus their energies with respect to the other on advancing these commonalities. Immediate events will inevitably impinge on this bi-lateral process, but they, too, must be addressed through serious discussion, not confrontation, and within the context of longer-term roles and objectives. Finally, to a greater extent than in the past, both countries need to nest their bilateral relationship within broader policies directed towards the Central Asian region as a whole.

Sign a U.S.-Kazakhstan Strategic Partnership Charter, and intensify the work under its specific working groups.

- The overarching recommendation of this report is to solidify the existing Strategic Partnership Dialogue Commission by signing a Charter on Strategic Partnership, which aside from yearly meetings, would or set up, or intensify the work of, Working Groups in the areas of security cooperation; economic and trade issues; democracy and governance; cooperation on Afghanistan; and nuclear security.

Intensify Cooperation in Defense and Security

- The U.S. should take the lead in working with Kazakhstani authorities to improve interoperability between Kazakhstan's forces and NATO, helping Kazbrig reach NATO Evaluation Level 2 and by expanding it to a three-battalion brigade.

- Institutionalize and intensify analytic interaction on regional security affairs.

Remove Impediments to U.S. Investment in Kazakhstan, and Campaign to Foster such Investments

- The government of Kazakhstan should enhance the rule of law at every level to improve the investment climate.
- The government of Kazakhstan should also regularize laws, removing overlaps and contradictions, and institute a more transparent regulatory regime.
- The U.S. government should decouple Kazakhstan's accession to the World Trade Organization from the Jackson-Vanik Amendment.
- Both sides should work to reduce the information deficit within the U.S. business community regarding Kazakhstan.

Rapid Completion of Kazakhstan's Accession to the World Trade Organization

- The U.S. should prioritize Kazakhstan's Accession to the WTO and prevent it from remaining on the back-burner, as it has been for years, and work with its partners and allies (mainly in Europe) to accelerate and facilitate this process.

Multi-Sided Cooperation on Post-2014 Afghanistan

- The U.S. and Kazakhstan share an interest in ameliorating and countering any diffusion of instability from Afghanistan into Central Asia, but should also take active measures to facilitate Afghanistan's future development.

Establishment of a "Central Asia Six Plus One" Entity

- The U.S. is the only major external actor in the region without a regularized consultative mechanism with Central Asia. It is not possible for the

U.S. to achieve its regional objectives, nor for Kazakhstan to do so with respect to the U.S., until the United States establishes its own platform for interaction on a regional basis. The United States should therefore move at once to create a “United States Central Asia/Afghanistan Partnership,” which will help cast the U.S.-Kazakhstan Relationship in terms of common regional objectives.

Expand Government-to-Government and Society-Society Contacts in the Fields of Human Rights, Rule of Law, and Democratization

- Kazakhstan’ progress in the area of democratization, human rights, and religious liberty is of global significance. To be successful, U.S. efforts to promote this development should work *with*, not *on* Kazakhstani authorities; Kazakhstan must be a partner in any process to build democratic capacity and habits.
- America should recognize that Kazakhstan’s embrace of religious pluralism and toleration under a secular state holds important potential for the Muslim world as a whole, and should therefore recognize and promote Kazakhstan’s religious freedom and secularism.
- Both sides should work toward increasing Inter-Parliamentary and State-to-Province Interactions, particularly as Kazakhstan transition from appointed to elected regional governors.
- Both sides should work to develop cultural and educational exchanges, building on the achievements of the Muskie and Bolashak programs, and the Nazarbayev University.
- Both sides should work to support greater exchange of information and analysis, and particularly work to make Kazakhstan’s information landscape more multi-vectoral.

Increase High-Level Visits, Including a Visit to Central Asia by the U.S. President

- No U.S. President has ever visited Central Asia, and Kazakhstan's President visited Washington last in 2010. The U.S. stands out compared to the flow of top-level visits between Kazakhstan and European as well as Asian states, which has been bewildering. Against this background, a presidential visit to Kazakhstan on a tour of the region would be an appropriate place for the U.S. to start re-engaging Central Asia.

Introduction

Beginning from nearly zero in Soviet times, relations between Kazakhstan and the United States have expanded and deepened enormously over the decades since Kazakhstan's independence. Whether one speaks of political contacts at the highest levels, cooperation on security issues, investments by U.S. companies in Kazakhstan, or the broadening cultural and education ties between the two countries, it is a record in which both countries can take pride. Yet in 2014 many dispassionate observers in both countries are wondering whether the United States and Kazakhstan have not slipped into fundamentally different trajectories.

Many in the United States, and in the West generally, are concerned that Kazakhstan, in spite of the range and depth of its existing foreign relations, has taken significant steps towards making a strategic choice in favor of its northern neighbor and has acceded to, if not endorsed, Russia's larger geopolitical agenda. Such observers fear that Kazakhstan, having joined the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization and associated structures, will disappear into those organizations, in the process diluting its "multi-vec-tored" or "balanced" foreign policy, which has become both the distinguishing characteristic of Kazakhstan's diplomacy and a model for the foreign policies of other Central Asian states and Afghanistan as well.

Of course, even skeptics acknowledge that the relative sizes of the populations of Russia and Kazakhstan, the length of their common border, Kazakhstan's significant ethnic Slavic population, the inherited structural links between their two economies, and the sharp imbalance between the size and equipment of their security forces, all require that Kazakhstan be especially attentive to, and protective of, its relationship with Russia. This is nowhere in dispute. Many concede that these factors, in addition to its long-standing enthusiasm for regional integration, pushed Kazakhstan toward becoming a sustaining member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and an early member of the Eurasian Economic Union.

Similarly, no one doubts the absolute importance to Kazakhstan of its relations with neighboring China. Indeed, the development of this relationship is one of the signal achievements of Kazakhstan's foreign policy and economic strategy since independence.

Acknowledging this, recent events in Ukraine and especially in Crimea have caused concern over the future of Kazakhstan's multi-vectored foreign policy. Anxious observers note that Kazakhstan today is Russia's closest link in the post-Soviet world, and ask if, under such circumstances, Kazakhstan can continue to give substance to its stated goal of a "balanced" foreign policy. Expert commentary in the United States and Europe question whether it will be possible for Kazakhstan, as President Nazarbayev asserts, to confine its engagement with EEU to purely economic issues. Instead, they note the ways in which economics and politics are intertwined in the EEU and the indications that Moscow views it as becoming eventually a political entity that might eventually rival the EU and United States. Noted one leading American intelligence brief, the EEU "gave Russia a way to institutionalize its influence in the bloc's member states." This view echoed former Secretary of State and likely presidential candidate Hillary Clinton who, as recently as March 2014, asserted that the EEU was Vladimir Putin's boldface attempt to revive the Soviet Union.

At the very least, this view, widespread in the United States, reveals a powerful communications and public relations problem for Kazakhstan. To the extent it is true, however, it poses a challenge to Kazakhstan-U.S. relations.

Similarly serious concerns have been voiced in Kazakhstan over the United States' intentions with respect to Kazakhstan and Central Asia as a whole. Those Kazakhs who have worked hardest to develop ties with the U.S. are worried that U.S. resources for foreign relations have flat-lined in recent years. Worse, they point out that if the figures are adjusted to take account of inflation, U.S. funding for all its foreign relations has declined. But the reality is yet more bleak, for the Obama administration has opted for a strategic "pivot to Asia" without identifying Central Asia as an organic part of such a move. In its practical application this amounts to a pivot *away from* Central Asia and Afghanistan. Whatever the U.S. may claim to the contrary, within Central Asia Washington appears to have entered a period in which Central Asia as a whole, including Afghanistan, is re-

duced to the status of a peripheral concern. Added to this is the post-Iraq/Afghanistan “war fatigue” in America, whose key feature is the voting public’s attention shifting away from international engagement and responsibilities in favor of domestic issues. In this exchange of suspicions, it is important to note that Kazakhstan itself has sought to place strict limits on its “integration” with Russia, so that it does not move beyond coordinating its economy with that of its northern neighbor. All Kazakhstan’s key statements on foreign policy since independence begin with an affirmation of the absolute priority of preserving Kazakhstan’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, and self-determination. Kazakhstan’s status as a newly independent state makes it especially protective of sovereignty and territorial integrity, as indeed in North America two centuries ago these cherished gains caused the newly independent and post-colonial United States to focus single-mindedly on independence and territorial security. Americans who know how carefully their Founding Fathers protected their hard-earned sovereignty in the face of foreign dangers should be the first to appreciate that Kazakhstan’s similar efforts today are not mere rhetoric but the key to national survival, and in the face of challenges that are no less serious than those faced by the American Republic in its early days. Such a narrative of Kazakhstan’s challenges would undoubtedly resonate deeply with American audiences.

On the other side, it is important to note that nowhere has the United States signaled a diminution of its relationship with Kazakhstan or its regional neighbors. U.S. ambassadors to Astana and other Central Asian capitals have repeatedly stressed America’s “enduring interests” in the region. Indeed, the number of contacts and interchanges in nearly every area continues to increase down to the present. Regarding America’s commitment to Kazakhstan’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, the United States in December 1991 was the first foreign government to recognize the new Republic of Kazakhstan, and official announcements from Washington since then have nearly always begun with a firm affirmation of America’s commitment to Kazakhstan’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, and self-rule. The U.S. remains solidly committed to its Energy Partnership Dialogue with Kazakhstan, and also their Joint Science and Technology Commission. Furthermore, Kazakhstan is the only country in Central Asia with which the United States maintains an actively functioning Strategic Partnership,

which has existed since 2002 and has given rise to the Steppe Eagle military exercise and assistance in the field of military education. The most recent meeting of the Strategic Partnership mechanism was co-chaired by Foreign Minister Erlan Idrisov of Kazakhstan and Secretary of State Kerry for the U.S. Reflective of this positive mood is the fact that last year's U.S.-Kazakhstan Convention drew thirty members of Congress.

Kazakhstan has repeatedly stressed that it considers its involvement in the Eurasian Economic Union to be confined to the sphere of economic relations, specifically to those actions that are compatible with Kazakhstan's sovereignty. To be sure, it would have been far preferable for Kazakhstan to have completed its accession to the World Trade Organization *before* joining the EEU, but this did not happen. Moreover, the EEU, which will be officially launched only in 2015, has yet to reveal itself or prove its worth. The recent devaluation of the Kazakh currency, the *tenge*, which some international experts consider a consequence in part of Kazakhstan's Customs Union commitments, has caused concern both abroad and in Kazakhstan itself. Under no circumstances does Kazakhstan see itself abandoning other relationships and commitments, notably those involving China, the United States, and the European Union. It has adopted many policies reflective of these commitments, from vigorous programs to expand American investment beyond the energy sector to collaborations in nuclear non-proliferation, technology, and other fields. Significantly, it welcomed and now proposes to expand its Strategic Partnership with the United States, which, at least in theory, exists in parallel with, and at the same level of importance, as its strategic partnerships with Russia and China - whose leaders unlike the US president regularly pay visits to Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan has acted on this orientation in many ways. Speaking only of education, Kazakhstan's school children are now required to study English, along with Kazakh and Russian. If it did not consider the American relationship of paramount importance, why else would Kazakhstan have teamed up with five American universities to plan and build its new capstone institution of higher education, Nazarbayev University, its only other international partners on this initiative being Great Britain and Singapore? Some in the United States may wish to disengage from Central Asia and Afghanistan, but reality will place stubborn impediments on the path to their doing so. Afghanistan, after its recent presidential

elections, presents a bewildering patchwork of problems and potential. America's neglect would foster a renewal of fighting there, which would inevitably become a destabilizing factor in the entire region, including Kazakhstan. Its further engagement in Afghan development will bring benefits to the US and to all Afghanistan's regional neighbors, including Kazakhstan.

The United States and Kazakhstan have many common interests, some of which are easily taken for granted. For instance, since August 29, 1991, when Nursultan Nazarbayev unilaterally closed down the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site, it has been a world leader in the movement for non-proliferation. In this capacity it has worked closely with Washington to advance non-proliferation further. In 2006 it joined with its Central Asian neighbors Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to affirm that the entire region would forever be a nuclear weapons free zone. To be sure, the U.S. initially opposed this out of fear that it would exclude the transport of nuclear material across the region, but in the end this step, too, earned strong endorsements from Washington. Beyond this, Kazakhstan has educated a younger generation that is open to the world, clearly oriented towards free and legal markets, and eager to participate in the affairs of their government through normal democratic channels.

These and other factors suggest that it is a mistake to think of Kazakhstan as being exclusively within the geopolitical orbit of any one country or grouping of countries. Significantly, Kazakhstan does not see itself as such, now or in the future. In this sense, Kazakhstan's foreign policy is multi-layered as well as multi-vectored. This study acknowledges fully the importance to Kazakhstan of its partnerships with Russia and China. But it also acknowledges, and seeks to build upon, the many common interests linking Kazakhstan with the United States and, indeed, with the Euro-Atlantic world.

Relations between Kazakhstan and the United States since the fall of the U.S.S.R. have gone through three major phases. During the first, from 1992 to 2001, the stress was on protecting Kazakhstan's sovereignty and territorial integrity; the privatization of state property and the first steps towards a market economy; laying the foundations of a participatory system of government; building (through NATO's "Partnership for Peace,") the elements of a post-Soviet and modern army; and integrating Kazakhstan into the key international institutions.

All of these goals remained in sight during the second period, from 2001 to recently, but from the American side they were subordinated to the enhancement of Kazakhstan's supportive role in the military effort in Afghanistan.

The third period, which we are now entering, calls for the development of a multi-dimensional relationship involving all the elements of the first two periods, but focusing above all on economic and institutional development and, significantly, security. On the latter, the choices are stark: Kazakhstan, despite its membership in CSTO, continues to seek balance in its security arrangements with external powers; will it be able to do so?

Broadly speaking, the security of Central Asia and of Afghanistan will be achieved either from without or within. History suggests that the former will in time lead to conflict and strife and that only the latter will work over the long term. Based on this view, U.S. policy has consistently supported the sovereignty and self-determination of all states in Central Asia, including Afghanistan, and cooperative relations among them and with states bordering the region.

Kazakhstan's response to its joining the EEU is to expand and strengthen its relations with its other strategic partners proportionately. On its side, the U.S. may seek a multi-dimensional relationship with Kazakhstan but cannot expect to achieve this without enhancing its own commitment to support Kazakhstan's sovereignty and security. Astana wants Washington to fulfill this role and it is our judgment that it is in America's interest to do so. Will the U.S. do this in a convincing manner, or will it seek to do so with half-measures?

Finally, it is important to take notice of the extent to which the main challenges facing Kazakhstan are regional in character, and are reflected in the challenges facing all of Kazakhstan's neighbors in Central Asia. This regional character of the relationship arises from geographical proximity and ethnic overlapping of the Central Asian states, common challenges arising from the Soviet era, age-old mutual economic dependencies, and deeper historical and cultural inter-relationships. U.S.-Kazakhstan relations cannot and do not ignore this. Indeed, it has always defined its interests in Central Asia regionally, and on this basis has built solid and constructive relations with all of Kazakhstan's regional neighbors. Similarly, Kazakhstan cannot ignore the need to revive and give substance to its relations with its neighbors in Central Asia, including Afghanistan. Indeed, the

first priority listed in the Foreign Policy Concept of Kazakhstan, published in 2014, affirms that “Kazakhstan is interested in a politically stable, economically sustainable and safe development of Central Asia.” Thus, Kazakhstan and the United States have identical views of their respective policies toward the region and the states that comprise it; in practice, it means that both Kazakhstan and the United States must nest their bilateral relationship in a policy directed towards the broader region as a whole. It is important for both sides to acknowledge that a successful relationship with the other cannot exist without each of them building and maintaining successful relationships with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan.

Creating a Charter of Strategic Partnership

Leaders of Kazakhstan and the United States have long termed their relationship a “Strategic Partnership.” On a visit to Washington in December 2001, President Nazarbayev and his counterpart, George W. Bush, issued a joint statement on what they termed “the new Kazakhstan-American relationship,” stating their “commitment to strengthen the long-term, strategic partnership and cooperation between our nations, seeking to advance a shared vision of a peaceful, prosperous and sovereign Kazakhstan in the twenty-first century that is increasingly integrated into the global economy and the community of democratic nations.” Yet it took a decade before the relationship, in 2012, was institutionalized into a “Strategic Partnership Dialogue Commission,” which has been co-chaired since 2013 by the U.S. Secretary of State, John F. Kerry, and Kazakhstan’s Foreign Minister, Erlan Idrisov.

The U.S. has instituted such a mechanism only with Kazakhstan in Central Asia. A flurry of high-level visits has underscored the importance of the bilateral relationship. The states’ presidents met during the March 2014 Nuclear Security Summit in The Hague, as has become customary during these summits. And in the past year, a series of high-level Kazakhstani officials have been received in Washington. This included Head of Presidential Administration Karim Massimov, Foreign Minister Idrisov, Defense Minister Adilbek Dzhaksybekov, Economic integration minister Zhanar Aitzhanova, Prosecutor General Askhat Daulbayev, and Deputy Senate Speaker Alexander Sudyin.

The development of this mechanism and the proliferation of visits are positive, as they provide a solid pathway for the deepening of relations, as well as for ironing out the mutual concerns, uncertainties and skepticism of the two countries’ foreign policy directions. That said, there is room for improvement in terms of the content of the Strategic Partnership, especially given the growing security challenges in Eurasia, from Ukraine to Afghanistan.

In the face of these challenges, the U.S. has two choices. The first is to support efforts to impose stability on the region from without; the second is to build and affirm the sovereignty and economic viability of the states of the region, including Kazakhstan, and to cooperate with these states on building stability from within the region. We believe the former option may produce short-term satisfaction but will lead in the longer term to deep instability, as it always has in the past when Central Asia has been under foreign hegemony. By contrast, the latter option, while requiring a long-term commitment, is much more desirable from both the perspective of regional states and for U.S. national interests. Furthermore, it is the only option that can produce long-term stability in the region.

- **Sign a U.S.-Kazakhstan Strategic Partnership Charter, and intensify the activities of its several specific working groups.**

On this basis, the authors of this report recommend that the Strategic Partnership Dialogue Commission be further solidified by the signing of a U.S.-Kazakhstan Charter of Strategic Partnership, which can institutionalize several working groups, some of which are already in existence. These working groups, headed by senior officials on each side, would meet regularly to advance the bilateral relationship by setting concrete goals and initiating processes toward their implementation. The Strategic Partnership Commission would convene yearly. Given that the first two meetings have been held in the United States, we recommend that the next be held in Kazakhstan.

We recommend that Working Groups focus particularly on the areas of security cooperation; economic and trade issues; democracy and governance; cooperation on Afghanistan; and nuclear security. Some activity is presently occurring under several working groups; but this work is poorly known, and to an outside observer, it often seems more *pro forma* than substantive.

The Working Group on defense and security would focus on deepening the bilateral relationship on defense and security issues, as well as promoting Kazakhstan's cooperation with NATO. Furthermore, it would develop bilateral analytical cooperation on regional issues including Afghanistan. Our recommendations for this Working Group are in the next section.

The Working Group on economy, trade, and energy would have as its main tasks to promote the bilateral business relationship, facilitate investments, and coordination on regional and continental transport and trade. It would also work to facilitate Kazakhstan's entry into the WTO. This is further discussed in section four.

A separate Working Group on Afghanistan, discussed in section five, would form an institutional home for coordinating the efforts of Astana and Washington to promote a peaceful and secure Afghanistan post-2014.

The Working Group on democracy and governance, discussed in section seven, should serve as the primary vehicle for the implementation of the goals set forward in the 1994 Clinton-Nazarbayev Charter on Democratic Partnership. Clearly, the United States and Kazakhstan at times have different perspectives on the democratic process in Kazakhstan. These differences are real, and should not be minimized. Yet the authors of this papers believe the bilateral relationship has progressed to a level where these differences can best be resolved through constructive dialogue, most notably through this proposed mechanism.

Finally, a Working Group on nuclear security should solidify the already substantial bilateral cooperation on nuclear security and non-proliferation, not least advancing Kazakhstan's efforts to host the International Atomic Energy Agency's Nuclear Fuel Bank.

Intensified Cooperation in Defense and Security

Deepening the U.S.-Kazakhstan Strategic Partnership in the field of defense and security is critical, given the increasing complexity of Central Asia's security environment. First, it features more actors than in any previous period whose vital or attendant national security interests intersect, converge or collide in Central Asia. Second, these actors have vastly greater capabilities to pursue their objectives than even a decade ago; moreover contextual dynamics—ideologies, politics, resources—have strengthened these actors' strategic intent to achieve their objectives. Third, cooperation between Washington and Astana will indicate that NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan will not mean an abdication of long-standing relationships with Kazakhstan and Central Asia. Fourth, risk-taking in Central Asia's emerging security environment is likely to be less restrained than in the past, not least because its geostrategic landscape includes several states that appear to be weak and losing their competitive edge, or are susceptible to outside influences or radical internal political change. And, fifth, such an environment is pregnant with the probability of miscalculation and surprise.

The best way for Washington to avoid security breakdowns in Central Asia is to work to strengthen the regional states and economies and to foster political, economic and security links with them all, and with Kazakhstan prominently. Above all, the existence of a geopolitical vacuum in any part of Central Asia would invite external interference, with grave consequences for world peace. Such a vacuum could arise from many causes, including the rapid erosion of the world economy or discontinuities in the development of either Russia or China. Equally, a vacuum could be caused by faltering economic and social development within Central Asia as a whole or in any of its states. Such a vacuum anywhere would tempt external powers to intervene, could affect U.S. interest profoundly, and could therefore in the end draw the U.S. into its vortex.

- **Intensify Defense and Security Cooperation; increase NATO interoperability.**

The many challenges to Kazakhstan's security in the future are almost certain to contain some that include the use of "hard power." Yet recent crises in Kazakhstan's southern neighbors have illustrated the inadequacy of existing security institutions in Central Asia. Several initiatives offer scope for expanding Kazakhstan-U.S. cooperation in this regard, including upgrading Kazakhstan's military engagement with the United States, with the aim of modernizing its forces and increasing their peace-keeping capacity. Kazakhstan's deeper participation in, and integration with, international peace-keeping operations and institutions—for example in OSCE and with NATO—is consistent with Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy, and also in line with U.S. interests. .

Similarly, NATO and Kazakhstan have long aimed to achieve the full interoperability of Kazbrig, Kazakhstan's Peacekeeping Brigade, with NATO, by reaching NATO Evaluation Level 2; and by expanding the single-battalion Kazbrig to a three-battalion brigade. The U.S. should take the lead in working to achieve this long-standing goal, which will be a step toward greater interaction between NATO and the Kazakhstani armed forces outside of Kazbrig.

In a similar vein, Kazakhstan would probably win support within NATO for some multi-layering of its security policies by participating in other fora representing different, overlapping sets of interests. This trend is visible between NATO and its close partners, where smaller groupings of like-minded states form regional sub-groupings to coordinate their policies. The Visegrad group and the trilateral Turkey-Azerbaijan-Georgia partnership are examples of this. We recommend that Kazakhstan consider similar steps to expand its discussion of security issues with regional and NATO states. Further, engaging Asian states like Japan, India and South Korea in broad-ranging discussions of regional security is also in Kazakhstan's interest, as it would promote the understanding that America's greater engagement with Asia includes *Central Asia*.

- **Institutionalize and intensify analytic interaction on regional security affairs.**

Among the most distinctive and significant features of the states of Central Asia today is that they have Muslim majority populations but are ruled by secular governments with systems of law under which persons are citizens rather than subjects, and they embrace and advance modern knowledge through extensive and growing educational systems. It is strongly in the interest of the United States, and of all other modern, open societies, that this model of development prove successful.

America's security interests, objectives and strategies should elicit an intense and focused engagement with Central Asia, yet few parts of the world are so systematically ignored in American strategic thinking. This is not something new. It was the case throughout the Soviet period, when Central Asia was seen as just one more part of the Soviet Empire whose interests were defined and addressed in Moscow. American involvement in Central Asia, including in Kazakhstan, has been more transactional than strategic. Within the U.S. diplomatic community, relations with Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states has consistently been assigned to relatively low level officials rather than to principals. No American president has visited Kazakhstan or any other Central Asian state. It is not surprising that there exists deep skepticism in the region regarding America's commitment to the security and stability of Central Asian states, individually and collectively. It is hard to see how this will change without a significant effort to draw attention to Central Asia's and Kazakhstan's strategic importance to the United States.

Both Kazakhstan and the United States seek a deeper understanding of Central Asia's challenges and opportunities. Our efforts should be directed toward closing significant gaps in our knowledge by understanding the objectives and strategies of Central Asia's growing number of powerful actors. Sharing information, perspectives and analysis will advance this goal. This suggests a significant opportunity for the Kazakhstan-United States relationship: the sponsoring of joint Kazakhstan-U.S. research and analysis focusing on Central Asia's security dynamics, the objectives and strategies of actors, potential downside scenarios and the contingencies they might cause, and, above all, the U.S.-Kazakhstan relation-

ship. Since no such institution exists anywhere else in Central Asia, Kazakhstan's effort to base its relationship with the United States on analysis, knowledge, and confidence will be unique.

A number of issues of concern to both Kazakh and American policy makers fit naturally into the agenda of such an endeavor:

- **Proliferation.** Few issues drive American strategic thinking so powerfully as the possibility of nuclear (and biological and chemical) weapons proliferation. The region surrounding Central Asia is the world's main cauldron of current nuclear powers—Russia, China, Pakistan, India, Europe—and more are possible in the near term. Iran's development of nuclear weapons capability will likely trigger other neighbors to follow suit. Saudi Arabia will not be able to ignore Iran's ascension to nuclear status and will build or buy its own nuclear weapon, probably with Pakistan's assistance. Turkey, too, will need to consider its posture. In this world, traffic in nuclear parts and know-how will move in many directions; small nuclear arsenals will destabilize existing deterrent relationships by making first-use a strategic advantage; and increased incentives for other actors to acquire nuclear capability will multiply. Kazakhstan's convening of the current round of negotiations with Iran points to its possible ongoing role in containing proliferation. As noted elsewhere, Kazakhstan's role as the leading advocate of non-proliferation in Central Asia is well-documented and widely applauded. Highlighting this legacy should be an important priority for U.S.-Kazakhstan relations.
- **Insecurity and state weakness.** Insecurity and state weakness in and around Central Asia will continue to occupy the attention of U.S. and Kazakh policymakers, as the dynamics and consequences of failure are likely to spread a variety of pathologies beyond their borders, including to Kazakhstan's periphery, Iran, India, and possibly even China. Kazakhstan's active promotion of contingency planning for such eventualities would undoubtedly be welcome in Washington.
- **Energy security of both Central Asian suppliers and European consumers.** In the post-Ukraine world, energy security is acquiring a new urgency.

New pipelines are being contemplated in many directions; old ones are being reassessed for their strategic viability. Frontal energy politics—denial, coercion, threats, intimidation—gain new currency as strategic instruments. We can also expect both supply and demand to change as new technologies open up new energy supplies and consumers seek to free themselves from energy relationships dominated by powerful and self-serving suppliers.

- Drugs, criminal activity and radical ideologies. Central Asia's position as a both an originator of these activities and as a transit route to Europe and beyond will remain a powerful concern in the post 2014 era.

Focused Effort to Remove Impediments to U.S. Investment in Kazakhstan, and Campaign to Foster such Investment

Kazakhstan offers increasing opportunities for American investors. Besides the direct benefits that such investments offer to both parties, the vibrant economy that such investments help create is the surest guarantor of Kazakhstan's security and sovereignty. A strong and modern economy garners public support for the government at home and raises the price of opportunism and adventurism on the part of all external forces and powers.

The record of Kazakhstan-American economic relations since 1992 presents much good news. The U.S. has consistently ranked among the top international investors in the Kazakh economy, and many of the resulting investments have broadened and deepened Kazakh-American dialogue and understanding in many fields well beyond the investment itself. Kazakhstan has responded to interest on the part of U.S. and other foreign investors with important reforms in many spheres. Even if this process is far from complete today, prospects are bright. It is no surprise that the international professional services firm Ernst & Young projects a strong future for the Kazakh economy and U.S. investments therein.

It is appropriate for the U.S. to welcome the recent decision by Kazakhstan's National Welfare Fund to privatize 106 additional firms, and the proposal by President Nazarbayev to create an "investment ombudsman" and to institute a "one stop" mechanism for foreign investors. Indeed, the vision of Kazakhstan's economic future embodied in the President's "Kazakhstan 2050" vision, focusing on further reform, marketization, and diversification, is attractive to investors from America's private sector, provided it is implemented down to the bench level.

At the same time, vexing problems have arisen on both sides. Some, like the difficulties that have arisen in connection with the giant Kashagan oil project, in

which major U.S. oil firms are deeply invested, arise as much from nature as from people. The resulting cost overruns and revenue delays present challenges to all partners. But all current investors of Kashagan remain confident in the future of the project, which will generate enormous volumes of economic benefits for all stakeholders.

Other concerns are raised on both sides. Kazakhstan, for example, still chafes under the Jackson-Vanik Amendment to the 1974 U.S. Trade Act. Originally designed to punish the U.S.S.R. for preventing the emigration of Soviet Jews and for other human rights violations, the act remains in force today, a quarter century after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even if its practical impact is insignificant, it poses a needless irritant. The Kazakh side also complains retroactively over the terms of some early contracts with U.S. firms, and has consistently worried that trade with the U.S. and other advanced economies would leave their country a dumping ground for old technologies.

On the U.S. side, there has been a mounting concern over the possibility that Kazakhstan's impending membership in Moscow's Eurasian Economic Union might adversely affect conditions for trade and investment from outside the EEU. The recent devaluation of the *tenge*, as noted above, has also raised fears regarding the stability of Kazakhstan's currency as it adjusts to the EEU's regulations. Even though this has not resulted in a flurry of selling or buying by Kazakh or western investors, fears persist that the Kazakh economy might suffer from further uncertainties of this sort, especially if the Kazakh economy does not diversify and if further reforms are not forthcoming. True, these anxieties may be the product of a kind of "information gap," as some observers have argued, but they persist nonetheless and cannot be ignored.

It is true that America's regulatory process delays and sometimes discourages investment abroad, including in Kazakhstan. It is also true that in June 2014, President Nazarbayev proposed measures to greatly improve the country's investment climate. But it is not a healthy situation when American investors complain of "appropriations, capriciously imposed taxes, favoritism, and corruption." The country's authorities appear to realize these challenges, which mainly persist at regional and local levels, and has initiated proactive measures. Yet left unattended, these various issues will retard the development of the U.S.-Kazakhstan economic relationship.

- **Enhance the rule of law at every level.**

Concerns regarding the rule of law include the strengthening of patent and copyright protection, prevention of “takings” from legally acquired property, etc. The fact that interpretations of the administrative tax code are not subject to adjudication in courts of law raises inevitable concerns over bureaucratic caprice. Even though the Kazakh president has refrained from exercising his right to review decisions of the Supreme Court, that right itself breeds unproductive fears and distrust.

The rule of law in Kazakhstan can be further enhanced through cooperation with the American Bar Association (ABA) and other similar entities. Kazakhstan's current efforts to strengthen the rule of law and reform its legal system can be made more successful through exchange of judges and delegations between the courts of the two countries.

- **Regularize laws, removing overlaps and contradictions.**

Down through the centuries, trade and investment everywhere has given rise to legal disputes. Kazakhstan's cluttered legal landscape, with contradictory laws dating from Soviet and post-Soviet times, breeds ambiguity and uncertainty and prevents harmonious resolutions. Worse, it can give rise to selective enforcement and create the impression that law-breaking is a norm of the system. To strengthen the work with foreign investors' community the central government has been strengthening local governance by appointing English speaking and Western educated staff to the management positions. Yet more remains to be done to address these issues.

- **Institute a more transparent regulatory regime.**

Kazakhstan's business environment would benefit from a regime in which norms are refined through regular feedback from those affected by them. Americans know from experience at home that the absence of transparent and equitably enforced regulations can create the impression that government criminalizes what might be legitimate business activities. This in turn can drive business practice from the sunlight into the shadows. In the meantime, the Government stimulates

the establishment of mechanisms and platforms where all these issues could be addressed. For instance, one of the reliable channels to talk about problems of the local private sector is the National Chamber of Entrepreneurship, where any small-medium sized company can raise their issue directly with the Government.

- **Contribute to Positive Change Through Larger Business Presence**

Better Rule of law comes through change in culture of doing business. American companies can serve a catalyst for change, as they demonstrate the best practices and ethics in dealing with their local partners and government. As more and more Kazakh employees, especially young people, are hired in American companies and exposed to the best practices, they will adopt modern corporate ethics. After being trained through learning by doing or formal programs overseas, these young people will add to development of new way of doing business in Kazakhstan.

These and other recommendations pertain not to general declarations of intent or *principles*, but to the practical world of implementation. In general, American investors from many sectors are convinced that greater attention to the details of implementation as opposed to declarative policies will quickly enhance Kazakhstan's attractiveness for investors in the many fields pertinent to Astana's effort at diversification. Small and mid-sized firms are more portable than large firms, especially conglomerates in the energy sector. As they perceive these changes as the warp and woof of a flourishing domestic Kazakh economy, they will make long-term commitments to Kazakhstan and thereby enhance the environment in which other small and mid-sized firms will do so as well. At that point, too, they will embrace Kazakhstan as the logical hub for diverse enterprises that function on a region-wide basis.

Of course, these measures alone will not suffice to achieve this. Faster border crossings and vastly improved transport among Central Asian capitals are also essential. Foreign investors therefore applaud Kazakhstan's plans to expand inter-capital air connections with smaller jets. But the full benefit of these and other attractive initiatives will be achieved only when Kazakhstan focuses more attention on the day-to-day transactional issues that are the heart of all business.

On the basis of two decades of close interaction with American investors, firms, and the U.S. government, Kazakhs have identified their own list of impediments which, if removed, would greatly expand opportunities and enhance economic interaction between the two countries. Two of these are particularly important:

- **Decouple Kazakhstan's accession to the World Trade Organization from the Jackson-Vanik Amendment.**

The transition from Soviet times to a modern, law-governed state and free economy is difficult, and many serious missteps can occur along the way. However, changes that Kazakhstan has instituted since independence justify the U.S. working *with* rather than *on* Kazakhstan in resolving them. Recognizing this, the U.S. Executive Branch should declare to Congress that Kazakhstan is in compliance with Jackson-Vanik norms.

- **Reduce the information deficit within the U.S. business community.**

The current state of information on Kazakhstan's development as a whole and on its business climate remains limited in the United States. To date, American perceptions of the business climate in Kazakhstan have been shaped overwhelmingly by what is in all world regions one of the most difficult and vexed spheres, namely, the energy sector, especially gas and oil. While immensely important, this sector is bound to decline as a percentage of all U.S. joint economic activity in Kazakhstan, as other sectors there gain traction and begin to revive. This will happen not as a consequence of expensive public relations campaigns, which are often less effective than expected, but as a result of the positive experiences of businesses and investors in the emerging fields.

Many heretofore neglected sectors could benefit from such interest. USAID and several private firms have helped foster the modernization of Kazakh agriculture, but without embracing the possibility that Kazakhstan can more quickly attain a world standard in this sector than in many others, and that it can in fact contribute significantly to world food security. In spite of massive urbanization, agriculture remains a key element of Kazakh economic and social life. Failures in this sector feed social unrest, while successes foster social stability.

The potential of other sectors of Kazakhstan's economy are similarly undervalued. Its highly literate and numerate population remains largely untapped by U.S. investors.

Current Kazakh developments in manufacturing, information technology, and such soft commodities as organic products should be attractive to American investors, if they knew of them. The U.S. should open its market to these, as it has done for other post-Soviet states. Even as fundamental a sphere as mineral exploration remains largely untouched, with much of western Kazakhstan remaining terra incognita to modern geology. Joint research there by the U.S. Geological Survey and Kazakhstan can open vast new possibilities, as occurred when the U.S.G.S. undertook its great survey of Afghanistan's underground resources.

- The U.S. Trade and Investment mission to Kazakhstan, planned for late 2014, should be treated as a major initiative. Clear and ambitious metrics for success should be defined and both sides should work closely to achieve them. The mission would be a starting point for further exchange of intraregional business-to-business trips between the both countries.
- The U.S. should also prioritize the expansion of trade and investment involving Kazakhstan offered by the planned world exposition, to be held in Astana in 2017. In 2012 Kazakhstan received agreement from the International Exposition Bureau to mount a major exposition in 2017, the first such international exposition to be held anywhere in the former U.S.S.R. Its theme, "Future Energy," has already attracted more than a hundred countries, including the United States. EXPO 2017 offers an attractive opportunity for U.S. firms and investors interested in emerging energy technologies. Aside from the obvious prospects for firms involved with current technologies, it opens important prospects for collaborative research, thanks to the close link that has been forged between the Exposition and the new and physically adjacent Nazarbayev University. As noted above, several divisions of this new national institution are being developed in collaboration with American research universities, including the University of Wisconsin, Colorado School of Mines, University of Pittsburgh, Duke University and the University of Pennsylvania. Since these joint

ventures comprise many fields in the sciences, medicine, and technology, the prospects for collaboration with U.S. firms and investors are highly promising.

Rapid Completion of Kazakhstan's Accession to the World Trade Organization

Kazakhstan has been negotiating for membership in the World Trade Organization since 1996. For a number of years now, officials have proclaimed Kazakhstan's imminent accession, but these proclamations have failed to materialize. The most recent estimates by Kazakh officials now talk of accession in early 2015. Kazakhstan's relationship with the WTO has been complicated by questions arising from its membership in the Eurasian Customs Union and the proposed Eurasian Economic Union.

- **Prioritize Kazakhstan's Accession to the WTO and prevent it from remaining on the back-burner.**

In purely economic terms, Kazakhstan stands to benefit only modestly from membership in the WTO. But 96 percent of Kazakhstan's trade is with WTO members—including 40 percent with the EU, and about 17 percent each with China and Russia. Regionally, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have joined the organization, whereas Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have not. Membership in the WTO is not just an economic issue: it is an issue of Kazakhstan's vision for its future. With all its major international partners being members of this body, it certainly makes sense for a landlocked country seeking to broaden its international trade patterns to seek membership. As recently as January 2014, President Nazarbayev stated that WTO accession is “one of the nation's foreign trade priorities.” Further delays in Kazakhstan's joining WTO will leave it less open and attractive an economy for American investors and more subject to retrogressive pressures from beyond its borders.

Prior to Kazakhstan's accession to the Eurasian Customs Union, the issue of Russian and Kazakhstani WTO membership was frequently discussed in conjunction with the Customs Union. Econometric studies by the IMF and ADB concluded that Kazakhstan's Customs Union membership would create considerable

trade diversion, primarily given the substantial hike in external tariffs imposed on Kazakhstan by the adoption of Russian tariffs. Simply put, Customs Union membership was projected to reduce Kazakhstan's trade with the rest of the world, trade that would *not* be replaced by trade within the customs union. And this in a situation where landlocked Kazakhstan already over-traded with Russia and under-traded with the rest of the world. However, an IMF study concluded that if Kazakhstan did join the EEU, the results would be less harmful if it did so *after* having acceded to the WTO.

At the time, Kazakhstan's accession to the WTO seemed more likely than Russia's, and many analysts speculated on the implications for Kazakhstan if it acceded to the WTO before Russia did. Analysts noted that if Russia and Kazakhstan were both in a Customs Union, they could jointly negotiate their WTO membership: in terms of tariffs, they could negotiate a joint common external tariff that both countries and the WTO could accept. Conversely, if both were WTO members before entering into a Customs Union, that would generate no problems in principle. However, "for one country to enter the WTO before the other, in the absence of an established customs union, would set an upper bound to the eventual CET of the Customs Union"—and complicate the WTO negotiations for the other country considerably. This is exactly what happened, but not in the order analysts had predicted: Russia joined the WTO in 2012, after the formation of the Customs Union. Kazakhstan meanwhile decoupled its approach to WTO from Russia. The situation is thus highly advantageous for Russia, which got the benefits of the WTO membership, as well as the formation of a Customs Union in which it is in a leading position—while the two other members remain outside the global trade body.

Kazakhstan was on a relatively good path to WTO accession by 2007-08. But the United States and European Union made Russian accession a major policy priority. There is general consensus that strong Western support for WTO applicants is crucial for the success of their negotiations. This created a Russia-first environment in Western capitals that placed Kazakhstan's accession on the backburner. For a time, Kazakhstan's hopes were buoyed by Vladimir Putin's suggestion that the three Customs Union members negotiate jointly for WTO accession. But that failed to materialize, for several reasons. Western states and the

WTO secretariat balked at the idea, arguing it would add years to the negotiations. Moreover, Belarus was far less advanced in negotiations than either Kazakhstan or Russia. And finally, there was disagreement on the policy at the helm of the Russian state, with then-President Dmitry Medvedev opposing the idea. Eventually, Russia changed tack, deciding to enter the WTO on its own. This left Kazakhstan “to revisit some of its existing bilateral accords, in which it previously agreed to lower duties than the planned common customs tariff.” Only after Russia’s accession in 2012 did serious attention return to Kazakhstan’s own accession to the WTO.

A related question is: does it matter? The case has been made that Kazakhstan does not stand to gain much from WTO membership. In the strict sense, this is true. The benefits that would accrue from tariff reform and improved market access are small, in the fractions of a percentage point. And to gain access to the WTO, there are numerous concessions that Kazakhstan will be forced to make. While most outstanding issues between Kazakhstan and the United States have been handled, this is not the case with the EU. Here, Kazakhstan seeks to increase the amount of goods refined within its territory, and has a practice of imposing export customs duties on its exports to the EU, which are mainly raw materials. The EU opposes this. Secondly, numerous WTO members oppose Kazakhstan’s decision to subsidize transport costs of exported grain—which Astana finds necessary given the enormous transport costs from landlocked Kazakhstan, at around \$130 per ton of grain. Further, the EU opposes Astana’s requirement that subsoil investors buy Kazakh goods rather than imported ones to the extent possible. And finally, Kazakhstan’s meat production subsidies are another point of contention. The agricultural issues, in particular, are important given that close to half of Kazakhstan’s population lives in rural areas, and is dependent on the competitiveness of its production, which the government fears would be destroyed if subsidies were rapidly curtailed.

While the direct gains may be limited, there are considerable gains flowing from WTO membership in the general transformation of the Kazakh economy into a modern, western-style rule-based market economy. While these gains cannot be directly linked to the WTO *per se*, they would be consequences of decisions Kazakhstan would take to join WTO, but would otherwise be unlikely to make. This includes the positive impact of Kazakhstan’s image in the perception of

American and other western investors. In sum, WTO membership would provide a lock-in effect on reforms, and provide positive impact on foreign investment. These issues are important in the long term. As Kazakhstan seeks to diversify its economy away from a dependence on oil and gas, it faces considerable challenges that derive largely from its geography. Transport, trade and investment are going to be key in any diversification attempts; and in this context, it makes sense for Kazakhstan to focus on building a service-based rather than industry-based economy, on building a long-term role in the world economy on productivity, and on being embedded in an institutional and legal framework. The WTO membership would be supportive of such a path. Thus, in the long term, WTO membership will help Kazakhstan improve its ability to avoid the “resource curse.”

Aside from this broader point, of course, there is the fact that WTO membership would work to counter some of the negative effects of the Customs Union on Kazakhstan’s economy, and enable Kazakhstan to improve its trade with the rest of the world, all while enjoying some of the positive effects of the Custom Union, which has yet to show its effectiveness.

Inevitably, there is a political and even geopolitical element to membership in any international organization. As Kazakhstan enters the Eurasian Union, it will be important to continue to signal to the world that this does not mean a renunciation of Kazakhstan’s sovereignty. Indeed, in the context of the Eurasian Union, WTO accession becomes almost a *sine qua non* for a continued multi-vector foreign policy. Therefore, Kazakhstan should speed up its accession to the WTO. But it cannot do so alone. Especially following the Ukraine crisis, it is now up to the EU and U.S. to prioritize the issue. In March 2014, for example, a Russian delegation was prevented from flying to Washington to attend a negotiation session on Kazakhstan’s WTO accession. Western sanctions on Russia will inevitably have the unintended consequence of affecting Kazakhstan, given Kazakhstan’s membership in the Customs Union. For the U.S., it will therefore be important to take steps to compensate for any negative implications for Kazakhstan of U.S. sanctions. On a broader level, the U.S. should raise its political attention to Kazakhstan’s WTO membership, and coordinate with European partners on the issue, as Kazakhstan has more unresolved matters with the EU than with the U.S.

Kazakhstan is keenly interested in finalizing its negotiations on WTO membership. However, there are potentially costly concessions Kazakhstan has to make in order to receive benefits that are limited in the short to medium term. That said, it is likely that Kazakhstan will make the necessary concessions if suitable transition measures are found. But to do so, Western countries must make clear to Kazakhstan that there is a western commitment to finalize its accession, so that it will begin to benefit from WTO membership economically as well as politically once it decides to accept the necessary concessions.

Multi-Sided Cooperation on Post-2014 Afghanistan

There is widespread concern in Central Asia over America's imminent withdrawal from Afghanistan. These concerns include the risk of renewed civil war in Afghanistan and its diffusion into Central Asia, with direct security implications for Kazakhstan. Many are concerned, too, over the rapid departure of western NGOs and of U.S. assistance. They point to the case of Timor-Leste, where the rapid withdrawal of international organizations contributed to a dramatic collapse of the country's economic performance and security.

Already, the concerns over post-2014 Afghanistan have elicited a defensive response around the region. This is quite understandable, yet its consequence is to focus more on handling the instability that may spread into Central Asia from Afghanistan than addressing Afghanistan's future development. The authors of this paper agree that the U.S. and Kazakhstan share an interest in ameliorating and countering any diffusion of instability from Afghanistan into Central Asia, but believe that they should also take active measures to facilitate Afghanistan's future development. We note with approval the substantial commitments made both by the United States and Kazakhstan, including at the 2012 international conference in Tokyo, and the certainty that many development programs initiated in Afghanistan will continue after 2014. Kazakhstan, meanwhile, has created within its Kabul embassy an office on trade and investment, although its results to date have been modest. Similarly, American investors have shown themselves to be risk averse with respect to Afghanistan. Greater collaboration between Kazakhstan and the U.S. in the field of Afghan investment will spread the risk and doubtless bear fruit.

Sound strategy seeks to anticipate and address potential crises but it must also anticipate and respond to possible *positive* developments. With respect to Afghanistan, the international community has focused on the first of these tasks, neglecting the second. Yet there are solid grounds for thinking that Afghanistan might achieve an economic breakthrough. First, it has a solid, historically rooted

sovereignty, exemplified by the fact in spite of thirty years of conflict, no significant political faction has proposed to secede from Afghanistan. Second, Afghanistan has impressive natural resources, which have only recently been mapped, but have yet to be developed. Third, the country has a generation of talented and cosmopolitan young leaders emerging; and fourth, its being landlocked is mitigated by an ideal geographical location as a potential hub for continental transport and trade.

If any combination of these assets takes hold, Kazakhstan and the United States—individually and together—will have the opportunity to invest in projects that combine their unique respective competences. To name only one example, the strengths of American and Kazakh agriculture could be combined to turn Afghanistan once more into an exporter of farm products. In another sphere, both the U.S. and Kazakhstan have invested in the training of a young generation of Afghans, but they are yet to combine forces in this task. One concrete possibility is for Kazakhstan to establish a named school or program in the area of mining, energy, and/or small and medium enterprises, to be hosted at the new American University of Afghanistan in Kabul.

Overall, the U.S. policy toward the region should be “Central Asia-centric” rather than “Afghanistan-centric,” as creating a prosperity belt around Afghanistan will positively influence the situation there.

Establishment by the U.S. of a “Central Asia Six Plus One” Entity to Enable the U.S. and Kazakhstan and Other Regional Partners, to Cast Their Relationship in Terms of Common Regional Objectives

An important, even urgent, area of concern to both Kazakhstan and the United States is the relation between national development in Kazakhstan and the other states of Central Asia.

Kazakhstan has acknowledged that its own progress cannot occur in isolation from the progress of the four other former Soviet states of Central Asia and of Afghanistan. For this reason President Nazarbayev, in August 2013, met with President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan, at which time the two leaders agreed to establish a strategic partnership between them and to exchange delegations of business leaders and investors. Parallel with this, Kazakhstan has worked to expand its links with the other new states of the region and with Afghanistan.

On its side, the United States has consistently taken a regional approach to Central Asia. Indeed, the reorganization of the State Department in 2006 to create a Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs had as one of its main purposes the removal of bureaucratic impediments to closer coordination between U.S. programs in Afghanistan and those in its northern neighbors in Central Asia. The New Silk Road Project launched in 2011 as a strategic U.S. initiative to enhance transport and trade within this historic cultural zone and the major economies of India, Pakistan, China, and Europe, is also solidly grounded in a regional, rather than bilateral, approach.

Beginning immediately after the establishment of their new sovereignties, the Central Asian states as a group embraced a regional approach. To this end, they created several collaborative entities, among them the Central Asia Cooperation Organization, which mounted collaborative programs in many spheres. President Nazarbayev called for establishment of the Union of Central Asian States.

In 2004 President Putin of Russia asked to join the Central Asia Cooperation Organizations, but shortly thereafter he proposed to close the organization and merge it into the Russian-sponsored Eurasian Economic Community, which later developed into a Common Economic Space, the Customs Union, and the planned Eurasian Economic Union.

In a separate initiative, Uzbekistan proposed the creation of a Nuclear Free Zone in Central Asia. By 2006 this became a reality when all five former Soviet republics agreed at a meeting in Kazakhstan to ban nuclear weapons from their territories. This landmark decision involved all regional states but no external superpowers.

Major countries have also found it both necessary and convenient to create region-wide platforms for their interactions with Central Asia. China founded its Shanghai Cooperation Organization, while Russia worked through its Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Customs Union and Eurasian Economic Union. Meanwhile, Japan established its “Central Asia Plus Japan” platform for dialogue, Korea set up its “Central Asia-Korea Dialogue,” and the European Union inaugurated its EU-Central Asia collaboration, which embraces the spheres of economy, society, and security.

The United States continues to affirm its commitment to a regional approach to Central Asia and Afghanistan. Recently, the Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs affirmed that America “promotes policies that make regional integration a reality, knitting together all the countries through a web of economic, energy, transit, trade, and people-to-people linkages.”

In spite of these declarations, the U.S. is the only major external actor in the region without a regularized consultative mechanism for making the Central Asia/Afghanistan region a living reality. Bluntly speaking, it is not possible for the U.S. to achieve its regional objectives, nor for Kazakhstan to do so with respect to the U.S., until the United States establishes its own platform for interaction on a regional basis.

- **The United States should therefore move at once to create a “United States Central Asia/Afghanistan Partnership.”**

This new platform will supplement bilateral relations, not replace them. Only with such a platform will the United States be able to integrate the Afghan economy with that of the region of which it is a part, advance its Silk Road Initiative, and create the cross-border relations and structures that will be essential to peace, investment, and economic development in the region. It would also be in line with the endorsement in Kabul in 2006 of such an agenda by an international group of conferees that included Kazakh foreign minister Kassymzhomart Tokayev.

This new partnership structure must include Afghanistan from the outset, not as an afterthought. It will enable regional partners to explain their common concerns to Washington and for the American government to offer its perspectives on all regional issues. Topics for consideration would arise from the participants, but could include energy, transport and trade, water, investment environments, communications, technology, security, region-wide business initiatives, relations with external powers, and such immediate issues as the Casa-1000 electricity transportation system, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline, and the extension of the Northern Distribution Network to Southeast Asia via Afghanistan. It could both reduce tensions, facilitate trust and collaborations where they do not now exist, and generate trust.

The “United States Central Asia/Afghanistan Partnership” should be the capstone of U.S. relations not only with Kazakhstan but, equally, with other states of the region. However, it can succeed only if it is actively led by the Secretary of State, who must convene the annual meetings in person. A small secretariat should be created to support the meetings, which would rotate among the various regional capitals.

Why bring up this initiative in the context of U.S.-Kazakhstan relations? Kazakhstan’s President Nazarbayev has repeatedly stressed the crucial importance of the regional dimension and has identified it as a major national priority within Kazakhstan’s overall strategy. His counterparts elsewhere in the region have done so as well, as has the United States itself. Kazakhstan has studied the possibility of a new Union of Central Asian States because it sees regionalism as an

essential and urgently important key to prosperity not only in Kazakhstan but throughout the region. Such an alignment of policies augurs well for the success of such an initiative.

Expand Government-to-Government and Society-Society Contacts in the Fields of Human Rights, Rule of Law, and Democratization

Alongside security and economic matters, issues of governance and human rights are ever-present in the bilateral relationship between the United States and other countries, including Kazakhstan. Both sides are cognizant of Kazakhstan's commitments to develop into an open society based on the rule of law, and to build an accountable government responsive to civic needs. However, while the parties carry on a dialogue on the subject, there remain areas of disagreement between U.S. and Kazakh officials on the substance of Kazakhstan's political development, as well as on the extent to which this should be an issue in the bilateral relationship.

This was evident during the negotiations leading up to Kazakhstan's chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The United States initially opposed Kazakhstan's chairmanship on the grounds of its domestic political situation, while Kazakhstan vigorously objected to what it considered a double standard among the U.S. and other members of the same organization. The impasse was eventually resolved as Kazakhstan signed into law new legislation on media, elections, and political parties, and committed to uphold the autonomy of the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights during its chairmanship. U.S. officials praised Kazakhstan's intended reforms. The success of Kazakhstan's OSCE Chairmanship is best illustrated by the fact that it achieved the first OSCE Summit in eleven years.

- **Work *with*, Not *on* Kazakhstan on Domestic Reforms and Elections**

For reasons noted above, the authors of this paper believe that Kazakhstan's progress in the area of democratization, human rights, and religious liberty is of global significance and must be nurtured. They agree, further, that the transition to democracy is no simple matter, and that in the case of Kazakhstan, this process

is complicated by the wrenching changes associated with the introduction of private property and a market economy, and also by geopolitical factors arising from Kazakhstan's location. In advancing this goal, it is paramount that foreign partners, especially the United States, work *with* Kazakhstan's elected authorities and other officials rather than *on*, let alone *against*, them. Put differently, Kazakhstan must be a partner in any process to build democratic capacity and habits. This approach should not be presented or perceived as a gift from the U.S. but simply as matter of what is likely to be most efficacious today and over the long term.

At present, Congressional orders require the Department of State to declare categorically if a given election is "free and fair." Similarly, reporting requirements for OSCE election monitors require that their analyses begin with a blunt statement that the given election either met European standards, or it did not. Both lead inevitably to a situation in which the Americans or Europeans are seen as endlessly wagging their fingers at those who fall short. Far better would be to indicate the *direction* of change manifested in the election under review specifically, whether it represented progress or regression compared to its predecessor. As long as progress is being achieved, the U.S. should stay engaged.

- **Recognize and Promote Kazakhstan's Religious Freedom and Secularism**

Kazakhstan prides itself on its secular statehood and inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony. Indeed, Kazakhstan has made interfaith dialogue a focus of both its domestic and foreign and policy, hosting in 2003 a first Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. Like other regional states, however, Kazakhstan has felt increasingly threatened by Islamist extremism arising both from forces beyond its borders and from domestic sources. Against the background of religious traditions weakened through deliberate policy during Soviet times, Kazakhstan's government has identified foreign proselytizing as a threat to interfaith harmony and to national security.

The authors of this paper believe that Kazakhstan's adherence to secularism is of importance far beyond the borders of Central Asia and something that the U.S. should value and support, the more so in light of the bleak fate of secularism in many other parts of the Muslim world. Certainly, there is room for criticism; the efforts of Kazakhstan and its neighbors to contain radicalism have at times led to

excesses that have only exacerbated the situation. Acknowledging this, America should nonetheless recognize that Kazakhstan's embrace of religious pluralism and toleration under a secular state holds important potential for the Muslim world as a whole, and may some day serve as a template for promoting peace within and among nations.

Yet American governmental policy has at times taken an opposite approach. As a result of an Act of Congress dating to 1998, the State Department is obligated to provide annual reports on international religious freedom. And since 2013, Kazakhstan has been included in the list of "Countries of Concern" by the Commission on International Religious Freedom. The yearly reports on Kazakhstan often fail to mention the secular nature of the state, nor the interfaith harmony existing in the country. Yet they strongly criticize Kazakhstani laws governing the registration of religious organizations and on the separation of religion from government, for example through a prohibition on religious rituals in government buildings. The authors of this report affirm the values enshrined in the Congressional act of 1998 but believe that the declaratory and hectoring manner in which the Department of State sometimes advances them is counter-productive. Bluntly, "naming and shaming" has proven to be a singularly ineffective tool among friends.

- **Increase Inter-Parliamentary and State-to-Province Interactions**

In the twenty years since independence, Kazakhstan has gradually built stronger state institutions. Kazakhstan is a presidential republic, but has gradually embarked on efforts to strengthen the role of parliament, as well as regional bodies. In 2012, a law was passed that ensured multi-party representation in the parliament, and the parliament elected in 2012 includes three parties: aside from the ruling Nur-Otan party, the pro-Business Ak Zhol Party and the Communist People's Party gained representation. These elections were criticized in some quarters, as restrictions prevented several opposition parties from contesting the elections. Yet the step to ensure multi-party representation can in the long term lead to the Kazakhstani parliament developing as an arena for public debate. This will not happen on its own, as the political experience of both the ruling party and the

smaller parties remain limited, thanks to the recent nature of parliamentary institutions and their constitutional dominance by the executive branch. Parliamentary exchanges are an important vehicle in the development of democracy; yet interparliamentary cooperation between the U.S. Congress and the Parliament of Kazakhstan remains an underutilized tool. A group for cooperation with the U.S. was created in the Kazakhstani parliament in 2012, and a U.S. Congressional delegation also visited Astana that year and in 2013. Both sides would benefit from more regularized exchanges of members, professional staffs, and party organizations, as well as structured discussions of major issues pertaining to the theory and practice of multi-party democracies in the twenty-first centuries.

Similarly, Kazakhstan's government has taken some first steps towards decentralizing power. A key process in this regard is the transition from appointed to elected provincial governors and mayors. Previously, Kazakhstan followed the system of a "vertical of power", with central, presidential control over the entire territory. But President Nazarbayev's "Kazakhstan 2050" vision, announced in 2012, includes the introduction of elected *akims*. A first set of local elections were held in 2013, and featured multi-candidate elections, with over 7,000 candidates competing for some 2,000 posts.

Down the road, this will mean that Kazakhstan's fourteen provinces will develop increasingly visible political identities. This, in turn, opens the opportunity for cooperation programs connecting them to U.S. governmental bodies at the state, county, and city levels. In this regard, the Sister Cities program might be expanded and analogous exchanges opened at the state/*oblast'* levels. Major strategic and analytic centers in the two countries could usefully identify and focus studies on governance questions that arise under both systems.

- **Develop Cultural and Educational Exchanges**

One of the success stories of the bilateral relationship has been the area of education and culture. The Edmund S. Muskie fellowships enabled large numbers of students from Kazakhstan to receive graduate education in the United States. An even larger number has been funded by the Kazakhstan government's Bolashak program. Since 2010, the Bolashak program has been refocused on postgraduate education and English-language undergraduate programs have been focused at

the flagship Nazarbayev University in Astana. As noted above, that University has itself been set up in close cooperation with several American universities, thus symbolizing the close U.S.-Kazakhstani relationship that exists in a sphere both countries consider absolutely central to their future welfare.

An important caveat to this positive picture is that the relationship is largely one-directional. Few Americans study in Kazakhstan and few pedagogues from Kazakhstan teach in American institutions. As Kazakhstani higher education gains in quality, however, we recommend that American universities and schools, with federal support, open opportunities for study-abroad in Kazakhstan, and that teachers from Kazakhstan be welcomed at American schools and colleges.

- **Support Greater Exchange of Information and Analysis**

The U.S. government, media, and information leaders have often found themselves at odds with Kazakhstan's policy regarding information. They point especially to the Kazakh government's introduction of laws (in 2009, 2012 and 2014) seeking to monitor and control the use of the internet. These concerns are valid, but equally valid concerns are generally overlooked. Kazakhstan is committed to a multi-vector foreign policy, but its information landscape, whether in traditional print media, television, or radio, is solidly mono-vectoral. One can point to historical and linguistic reasons for which media from Russia dominate Kazakhstan's news and information. But it is clear that any effort to limit information flows—for example, by filtering the Internet—will meet with strong American efforts to make the Internet ever more open, including by sponsoring the development of powerful anti-Internet circumvention technologies. For Kazakhstan's foreign policy to be truly balanced, and for it to maintain cordial relations with the United States at both official and unofficial levels, there needs also to be a balance in the public's sources of information.

Kazakhstan is not unique in its concern for the quality and content of the information available to its citizens. Indeed this concern echoes in many parts of the post-Soviet space. We recommend that Kazakhstan undertake an "information audit", assisted by independent organizations from Kazakhstan and the United States, to assess Kazakhstan's information universe and its likely evolution in the next decade or so. On this basis, the audit should make recommendations on

how Kazakhstan can attain pluralism in its public media, and in a way that meets the needs of Kazakhstan's political, economic and social development. The object should be to identify information priorities that can be adopted by both public and private organizations to enhance development without imposing arbitrary restrictions on media use and practices.

Meanwhile, in the United States, news and analysis on Central Asia in general and Kazakhstan in particular remain weak. In spite of the proliferation of electronic news outlets, there is a palpable lack of exchange and mutual understanding between the analytical communities in the U.S. and Kazakhstan, not to mention among the general populations. For this reason, we propose the creation of regularized meetings between journalists and scholars in the two countries. For instance, American journalists could actively participate the prestigious annual Eurasian Media Forum in Astana, which provides a platform for representatives of think tanks, media and governments to discuss topical international issues. Participants should not be limited to experts and institutions focused on the bilateral relationship or to the two capitals. Such gatherings facilitate the publication of popular and scholarly writings on each other's country.

Increasing High-Level Visits, Including a Visit to Central Asia and Kazakhstan by the U.S. President

Over the past decade, Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries have seen a steady flow of high-level visitors from Russia, China, and European states. In total, this paper's authors are aware of dozens of Heads of State visits to the region, including numerous from European states. Similarly, Central Asian Presidents frequently travel to state visits abroad, including a number of visits to EU states in the past decade. By contrast, no U.S. President has ever visited Kazakhstan; and since President Nazarbayev visited Washington in 2006—the same year that Vice President Cheney was received in Astana—and in 2010 to attend the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington—no Central Asian president has set foot in Washington.

Against the background of the international relations of Kazakhstan and its neighbors, the failure of top U.S. officials to visit Kazakhstan or its neighbors—or to invite its leaders to Washington—can only be interpreted as a slight, a downgrading of the region's importance to the U.S., and is therefore against the U.S. national interest.

One may retort that the lack of highest-level visits is related to the faulty Central Asian record in human rights and democracy. But that does not hold up. First, it is by no means accepted practice that high-level visits only take place as a reward for past behavior, rather than as a means of engagement with a view to encouraging future practices. Second, such a view cannot account for the frequency with which European states have engaged with Central Asia and with Kazakhstan in particular—European states whose commitment to democratic values are by no means lower than America's.

This reality is all the more noteworthy as the U.S. presented, in 2011, the New Silk Road Initiative, focusing on Central Asia—but that announcement did not lead to a top U.S. official traveling to the region to introduce the initiative. By contrast, two years later, Beijing responded to America's initiative by launching

its own “Silk Road Economic Belt” during President Xi's visit to Astana in 2013. When it did so, the Chinese president introduced the concept personally during a week-long trip across the region.

America's relations with Central Asia regrettably have been assigned to mid-level government officials, with principals seldom becoming directly involved. The time has come for a U.S. president to visit several countries in the region, a visit that might begin in Astana, to demonstrate that the U.S. government's repeated assertions of its “long term interests” in the region carry weight. In January 2013, Kazakhstan's Ambassador Kairat Umarov extended an official invitation to President Obama to visit Astana. A visit to Kazakhstan would be an appropriate place for the U.S. to start re-engaging the region, particularly in the aftermath of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, as such a visit would signal that the U.S. continues to have enduring interests in the region aside from Afghanistan.

A visit by the U.S. President to Astana would underline old and new realities of consequence for both Kazakhstan and the United States, while coincidentally identifying significant opportunities for future cooperation.

First, a presidential visit explicitly acknowledges the importance of Central Asia generally and Kazakhstan explicitly in US strategic thinking and planning. It underlines shared short- and longer-term objectives and, often, agreement on strategies to pursue those objectives. Moreover presidential visits underline shared visions of the future, including a commitment to values and processes that both countries hold dear. A presidential visit would be a strong indication that Washington is now prepared to invest strategic capital in Kazakhstan and strengthen its position in the heart of Central Asia.

Second, a presidential visit to Astana should quell the common perception that the United States is disengaging from Central Asia. More than this, it will likely leave a strong positive impression among strategists, policy executives, security planners and business and trade people that Kazakhstan occupies an important position in American perceptions of Central Asia's burgeoning opportunities. This would in no way represent a diminution of U.S. engagement with, and commitment to, the other states of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Third, such a visit will do more than reveal shared interests. It will fix priorities, engage and energize the process of policy formulation and implementation on both sides, and establish institutional anchors for new policy initiatives designed to advance the bi-lateral relationship. A presidential visit is the opportune moment to initiate new policies, or re-energize older or stalled policies of mutual benefit. Several of these initiatives are self-evident. (See below)

Fourth, presidential visits are frequently powerful incentives to foreign investors and business people, who might have been reluctant to launch initiatives in Kazakhstan prior to receiving a stronger sense of American commitment to support and protect their investments. A presidential visit is a visible and bankable commitment to Kazakhstan and to its neighbors

Fifth, a presidential visit to Astana will break a pattern of sending the U.S. Vice President (e.g., Vice-President Cheney in May 2006), the Secretary of State or lesser political personages to Kazakhstan as interlocutors of American interests in Kazakhstan. This reaffirms the seriousness of the United States' commitment. Moreover a presidential visit is essential to underpin Kazakhstan's policy of diplomatic balance, especially in light of presidential visits to Kazakhstan from other countries. These have included most recently the highly productive visits of the presidents of China (2013) and Russia (2012, 2013).

- **Strong Focus on Non-Proliferation**

The American President must necessarily promote nuclear non-proliferation, which represents a long-standing U.S. national interest. Kazakhstan's forward-leaning activities and policies to diminish the threat of proliferation locally, regionally and globally advance this interest.

Kazakhstan's activism in preventing proliferation is well-documented and should be highlighted. Its early efforts after the collapse of the USSR to place nuclear weapons remaining on Kazakhstan's territory under international control was boldly reflected in the Almaty Declaration of 1992, which was ratified by the United Nations. Project Sapphire, a successful covert cooperation between the governments of Kazakhstan and the United States prevented 1,322 pounds (600 kg) of weapons-grade uranium stored in poorly secured post-Soviet facilities on Kazakhstan's soil from moving uncontrolled beyond Central Asia.

In September 2006, Kazakhstan ratified the Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone—also called the Treaty of Semipalatinsk—a legally binding commitment not to manufacture, acquire, test or possess nuclear weapons. Kazakhstan has been a consistent and vocal supporter of President Obama’s non-proliferation and security initiatives (2009, 2012). At the Seoul Nuclear Security Summit in 2012, Kazakhstan confirmed its readiness to participate with twenty-three other states—including the U.S. and most of Europe—in creating the International Network for Nuclear Security Training and Support Centers, which seek to develop a cadre of well-trained nuclear security personnel capable of responding to nuclear security events anywhere. Kazakhstan currently is completing negotiations to house the International Atomic Energy Agency’s International Bank of Low Enriched Uranium and actively participated in the Nuclear Security Summit in the Hague in March 2014..

The non-proliferation challenge promises to be long-lived, with Central Asia at the center. Central Asia is bordered by four confirmed nuclear powers—Russia, China, Pakistan, and India. Moreover, the possibility that the number of nuclear actors will grow is high. Iran’s nuclear ambitions are well-documented. Its development of a nuclear capability has already stimulated other regional actors to reconsider their own nuclear futures. By any measure, non-proliferation is an issue that will have strong and persistent resonance in the present U.S. Administration. It is no exaggeration to say that non-proliferation strategy affecting a broad swath of Eurasia begins logically in Central Asia. Kazakh and American interests converge powerfully on this issue. Kazakhstan already has unparalleled credibility on non-proliferation issues, and, hence, a visit from a U.S. President will further enhance Kazakhstan’s convening power on nonproliferation issues, and enable it to join the U.S. in advancing the following:

- To expand the discussion of nuclear weapons to include chemical and biological weapons is consistent with Kazakhstan’s positions
- To highlight the value of an Iran free for all time of nuclear weapons, Kazakhstan might consider re-energizing the P5+1 talks with Iran, with Obama’s blessing.

Expo Astana 2017

Expo Astana 2017 will feature another issue of consuming interest to the United States: Future Energy. Indeed the mission statement for the Expo could have been written with President Obama's enthusiastic reaction in mind: "The mission of Future Energy is to appeal to the international community's sense of responsibility by way of institutions, organizations, corporations, and individuals, with the aim of generating debate and awareness regarding the decisive impact that energy management has on the lives of people and that of the planet."

Energy will remain a potent security issue for any American president despite America's growing energy independence because the health of the United States' economy depends directly on the economic health of regions sustained by Eurasian energy: Europe and Asia. Recent events in Ukraine, which feature energy leverage at their core, are likely to generate deeper and intense discussions of Eurasia's larger energy security architecture. Again, this seems a good investment in Kazakhstan's convening potential, especially if it elicits the support of the U.S. president.