

Kazakhstan - A Country to Watch

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Think of Kazakhstan and the chances are your thoughts are out of date. This proud, rich and extremely large country has escaped the shackles of its Soviet past. It is modernising into a significant player on the regional and international stage - confident and willing to do business with traditional partners in Moscow, and newer partners in China, South East Asia and the West. Both commercially and politically, the Kazakhstan of today is on the verge of becoming a significant player on the regional and international stage.

Kazakhstan boasts an impressive range of mineral wealth from oil and gas to ferrous and non-ferrous metals; a space launch facility; and a modern skyline in its sleek new capital Astana, reminiscent of Dubai, with many of the skyscrapers designed by British architects.

It is, however, Kazakhstan's decision to fast forward its integration into the international rules based system on which the world's security and prosperity depends, reducing the role of the State in its economy (through a substantial privatisation programme), and the introduction of English contract law in the development of the Astana International Financial Centre that makes this country one to watch; or if you are in business, one to consider visiting, before you are beaten to it by competitors in other countries.

Indeed, Kazakhstan is about to become a member of the World Trade Organisation and it aspires to membership of the G30 and the OECD in the coming years. An Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU will shortly be concluded, enabling a broader and closer relationship.

Kazakhstan's impressive commitment to development since gaining its independence in 1991 is why Prime Minister David Cameron visited the country two years ago and why President Nazarbayev will be visiting London as a guest of Government next month. His visit will confirm Britain's desire to be a partner of choice for Kazakhstan as it takes forward further reforms in governance, rule of law and human rights - all areas in which we are already providing support.

It will also be an opportunity for Britain to sign agreements with Kazakhstan in a wide range of areas, from hydro-carbons and renewable energy, to financial, professional and legal services. The Prime Minister will also confirm a substantial British presence at the future energy EXPO being held in Astana in 2017.

As I discovered on my recent visit, our two countries have many areas where we can collaborate. English is now taught in schools and an increasing number of students either complete their graduate courses or embark on mid-career development courses in the UK. As Kazakhstan further develops its substantial mineral and energy wealth, British expertise in these sectors is already being put to use.

Kazakhstan only gained independence 24 years ago, but earlier this month it celebrated 550 years since creation of the Kazakh Khanate - effectively the precursor of the modern state of Kazakhstan. So, it has been a significant presence on the crossroads of successful civilisations for millennia.

There is no doubt that this landlocked country the size of Australia, situated between Russia and China, where the apple is said to have originated and horses are claimed to have been first domesticated, and which has lived under the Tsarist and Soviet shadow, is taking significant steps to become a regional and global power. The forthcoming visit of the President is testament to the growing bond between our two countries. The hand of friendship is being extended to Britain; we should embrace it.