

#Kazakhstan shows international influence does not depend on nuclear firepower

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Kazakhstan's participation in a major international donor conference has offered it an opportunity to push for enhanced relations with the European Union, writes Colin Stevens.

That is one of the messages from Kazakh Foreign Minister Erlan Idrissov (*pictured*), who represented the country at the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, which concluded on Wednesday (5 October).

Amid intense security, Idrissov joined other world leaders to raise the billions of dollars for Afghanistan deemed necessary to keep that war-torn country running until 2020. Fifteen years after the US invasion to oust the Taliban the country remains reliant on international aid and faces a resurgent militant threat.

The Kazakh minister, during his visit to Brussels, noted that the attack this week by the Taliban in Kunduz province showed that Afghanistan has a “long road to achieving peace.”

Idrissov was also in the Belgian capital for this week's 15th EU-Kazakhstan Co-operation Council, the first since the Enhanced Partnership and Co-operation Agreement between the two sides was signed in December last year.

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The Kazakh minister, during his visit to Brussels, noted that the attack this week by the Taliban in Kunduz province showed that Afghanistan has a “long road to achieving peace”. Idrissov was speaking after meeting with Slovak Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajcak, whose country holds the EU's rotating presidency and who represented the EU at the Cooperation Council. Lajcak said the EU “recognizes Kazakhstan's support for Afghanistan and its fight against terrorism and drug trafficking”.

Idrissov, for his part, said the new Kazakhstan-EU agreement favoured the EU's presence in Kazakhstan and vice versa in areas like transportation, energy and education, as well as with regard to the fight against terrorism, so that security was ensured while liberties and individual freedoms were protected.

The agreement has been in place provisionally since May, covering such areas as political dialogue, trade and economic cooperation, the rule of law and justice. According to one well-placed EU source, the deal reflects “significant progress” in EU and Kazakhstan relations. The agreement will reinforce the presence of the European Union as the first trade partner and first foreign investor in Kazakhstan. In particular, it will support the development of business relations and create new opportunities for researchers and innovation actors from Europe and Kazakhstan, he said.

Speaking at a news conference in Brussels on Tuesday, Idrissov said the two parties agreed on their mutual interest in “strengthening relations and co-operation, including ensuring regional stability and development”.

During their meeting, the two men also discussed economic, political and judicial reforms, and international issues of interest to both sides, such as human rights protection. Idrissov told EU Reporter that Kazakhstan will hold a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 2017 and 2018 which, he

said, opens the way for his country to emphasize issues on which Astana and the EU have “shared visions.” Kazakhstan was elected to the UN’s inner circle on June 28 with a two-year term, starting in January – the first time a Central Asian country occupies a seat in the Council.

It will serve as one of the 10 non-permanent members along with Sweden, Bolivia and Ethiopia. Idrissov said, “The two-year term is a responsibility that we take with the utmost seriousness and pride. We are the first country from our region of the world to be part of the Security Council and we will focus on the global fight against terrorism and radicalism.” He said: “The best way to have lasting peace is to have sustainable development.”

Kazakhstan, he said will use its two-year Security Council stint to push issues that particularly affect Central Asia in the Security Council of the United Nations, with the “grand idea” to make the region a zone of peace, cooperation and security.

Kazakhstan already occupies a leading role in support of a nuclear-free world and Astana is now determined to achieve a nuclear-weapons-free world by 2045. According to Idrissov, as a country that 25 years ago signed a decree on closing the nuclear testing sites of Russia on its territory, it has the “moral right and responsibility” to promote the disarmament process and push for nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, both globally and regionally.

Kazakhstan’s foreign policy, emphasizing “peace, dialogue and international co-operation”, has been guided by the recognition of the “immorality” of nuclear weapons, said Idrissov, foreign minister since September 2012, a post he also held from 1999 to 2002. During the meeting with his Slovak counterpart, Idrissov also expressed interest in improving the ease of travel while discussing visa liberalization to facilitate mobility between his country and EU member states.

On this, Idrissov found a receptive audience in Lajcak, who said that while there was still for improvement, added, “We understand this, we support this and we are willing to move forward.”

This year marks the 25th anniversary of Kazakh independence and Kazakhstan has made landmark progress in its development over a quarter century of autonomy, making rapid breakthrough in its political and socio-economic development. One obvious example is that Kazakhstan is so far the only country in the post-Soviet area to sign an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU.

On a personal front, Idrissov has been called the best advocate of closer relations with the European Union. Statistics show that in 2015 trade turnover between Kazakhstan and the EU amounted to \$31.3 billion, which accounts for more than 40% of total foreign trade of Kazakhstan. The major part of foreign direct investments attracted to the country come from member states such as the Netherlands, France, Italy, Belgium and the UK.

Furthermore, over the last decade, the trade turnover between the EU and Astana increased 13 times. The question is: can Kazakhstan use its unique position to forge closer relations between the EU and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)? Currently, the EAEU is not only building up the system of internal cooperation between its members, but also establishing mechanisms to work with external economic players such as the EU.

As current chair of the EAEU, Kazakhstan is flying the flag in promoting cooperation with other key players, including the 28-strong EU and 2016 has been designated “Year for deepening economic relations of the Union with third countries and key integration unions.”

There is no doubt that Astana has the strategic vision needed to improve cooperation between the two integration unions and hopes are high that it will play a key role in pushing the dialogue

forward. Assessing his, and Kazakhstan's busy week in Brussels, Idrisov said: "We have shown that international influence and stature do not depend on nuclear firepower."

In a week when Kazakhstan has joined rest of the international community in trying to help restore some semblance of stability to Afghanistan, it is a message that will resonate around the globe.