

Trump's meeting with Kazakhstan president is important gesture of cooperation

By David Merkel

Originally published in The Hill, 15th January 2018

Following the first Anglo-Afghan war, London pursued a policy of “masterly inactivity.” This policy allowed Czarist Russia’s unchecked adventurism to annex the legendary Khanates of Khiva, Bokhara and Kokand, an area roughly half the size of the United States.

Over 170 years later, the Obama administration followed a policy of inactivity in Central Asia, although few would call President Obama’s handling of foreign policy masterly. Now, President Trump has invited Nursultan Nazarbayev, president of the Republic of Kazakhstan and Central Asia’s undisputed leader, for an official working visit. It is the first such visit for the leader of this strategically important country since 2006, when I served as Central Asia director at the National Security Council.

In Central Asia, leaders need to meet in person, and President Trump and his team are to be applauded for recognizing the importance of a meeting with the president of Kazakhstan. President Nazarbayev's visit coincides with Kazakhstan's presidency of the United Nations Security Council as they have a rotating, non-permanent seat, the first for the region.

Kazakhstan is a country of 17 million people within an area the size of western Europe. It shares a border with China and Russia, and possesses world-class reserves of oil and gas. Issues of non-proliferation, countering violent extremism, and Afghanistan loom large in importance. In describing Kazakhstan’s challenge of neighboring Russia and China, a Kazakh foreign minister told me that his country was just a “flea between two elephants.” Kazakhstan is no flea.

While the young people in Kazakhstan can look to a bright future, Kazakhstan’s legacy of being dominated by Soviet Russia and neighboring a resurgent China points to the difficulty Astana has in managing the demands of its neighbors. Regional forums and bilateral meetings have President Nazarbayev meeting with President Putin and President Xi several times a year. A U.S. president need not try to match this frequency, but active engagement enhances Kazakhstan’s sovereignty and insulates its citizens from possible overreach by their neighbors.

President Nazarbayev’s visit to Washington, as well as his chairing a meeting of the United Nations Security Council, demonstrates how far this country has come in the brief time since gaining its independence. The Trump administration has taken the opportunity, overlooked by its predecessor, to ensure that U.S. interests are welcomed, understood and advanced. However, a photo-op of the two leaders is not enough; rather, real progress should be made on important issues.

The United States and Kazakhstan enjoy good security and intelligence cooperation and need to enhance their cooperation against radicalization and terrorism in the region. This is all the more important in countering the threat of terrorism that could grow in Central Asia as ISIS fighters return from Syria and Iraq. Military-to-military cooperation should be strengthened through the purchase of U.S. military equipment to reduce Astana's sole dependence on Moscow for military equipment. In Afghanistan, Kazakhstan can be encouraged to work with the United States and others on infrastructure projects, education for women and pursuing greater stability.

There are a number of commercial issues that can benefit Americans, strengthen our relationship and make the region more stable and prosperous. Chevron recently invested approximately \$37 billion in its Tengiz field in Kazakhstan. Such an investment at a time when most in the industry are cutting capital expenditures demonstrates the confidence Chevron has in the future of this Central Asian nation.

During the Kazakh leader's visit, he will meet with Wall Street investors while in New York. Historically, such meetings have been for the discussion of investing Kazakhstan's financial reserves. But the purpose of this meeting will be to attract financial investment to the new Astana stock market and diversify the economy in Kazakhstan by selling shares in some of the country's leading companies, which are currently held by Kazakhstan's sovereign wealth fund, Samruk-Kazyna.

This will be a tall order, as many analysts question Astana's commitment. There will be a signing ceremony of some commercial agreements and, if this visit is successful, it may well solidify Kazakhstan as a preferred location for frontier capital looking for opportunities following sanctions in Russia and disruptions in the Middle East and Latin America.

Since 2015, Kazakhstan has been a member of the World Trade Organization but does not have permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) with the United States. American exports — primarily in the agriculture, manufacturing and technology sectors — could benefit from rectifying this oversight. Thankfully, there is a bill in Congress, H.R. 4067, that would address this oversight.

To be sure, President Obama and President Nazarbayev met on the margins of gatherings of world leaders, but not as Presidents Trump and Nazarbayev will do on this official working visit with Cabinet and government involvement from both capitals.

Defenders of the Obama administration's foreign policy point to the involvement of Vice President Biden who, like Vice President Cheney, visited Kazakhstan's capital. But it is the leadership of the president that is needed for real progress in foreign policy. If this were not the case, we would be talking about Spiro Agnew's opening to China, Walter Mondale's Camp David Accords or the seasoned, prudent handling by Dan Quayle standing against aggression during the invasion of Kuwait and managing the breakup of the Soviet Union.

David A. Merkel is a senior fellow with the Atlantic Council. He served as deputy assistant secretary of State and director of the National Security Council in the administration of President George W. Bush. He is a pro bono member of the board for Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan.