

Trump Reaches Out to Central Asia, Looking For a Back Door to Russia

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President-elect Donald Trump has already spoken to 44 world leaders on the phone since winning the U.S. election, including [several](#) conversations with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

On Wednesday, Trump made his first overture to former Soviet Central Asia, speaking with Nursultan Nazarbayev, the president of Kazakhstan. The pair talked counterterrorism, nuclear nonproliferation, and ways the Trump administration could actually mend fences, as promised during the campaign, with Moscow.

According to a readout of the telephone conversation released by the Office of the President of Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev congratulated the president-elect on his recent victory. Trump then praised the Kazakh president's 25 years of leadership, which he described, according to the readout, as a "fantastic success that can be called a 'miracle.'"

The pair then exchanged pleasantries and talked about a range of issues, from nuclear weapons to the war in Syria, before zeroing in on ways that Washington can reach out to Moscow. While far from revelatory — Trump's call Wednesday with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif offered plenty more gobsmack moments as well as a possible rewriting of U.S. policy toward Pakistan — the exchange could still be significant as Trump's transition team tries to cobble together its foreign policy agenda.

Nazarbayev is the first Central Asian leader to speak with the real estate mogul-turned-politician — and that's no accident. Kazakhstan, an oil-rich country of more than 17 million, has distinguished itself by trying to punch above its weight diplomatically, by hosting peace talks on Syria, negotiations about the Iran nuclear agreement, and recently securing a non-permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council.

More to the point, perhaps, Kazakhstan is also a close ally of Russia. According to the readout, the two leaders discussed how Washington and Moscow could mend ties, with Nazarbayev suggesting "the fight against terrorism, the Ukrainian crisis settlement and the global nuclear security strengthening" as areas ripe for greater cooperation. In response, Trump is said to have been "very optimistic about the prospects of developing cooperation between Washington and Moscow," given his recent conversations with Putin.

On the campaign trail, Trump said the United States should look to repair its relationship with Russia, especially by cooperating to fight the Islamic State in Syria. The president-elect's transition team is yet to name several key cabinet

posts, like secretary of state, that could augment the incoming administration's foreign policy. But Trump has selected Lt. Gen. Mike Flynn as national security advisor, an appointment likely to shape the broad cut and thrust of the Trump administration's global engagement.

A retired three-star general and former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency from 2012-2014, Flynn is petrified by the threat posed by Islamic terrorist groups — he actually likened the threat from the Islamic State to that posed by Germany — and called for cooperating with Moscow in order to fight terrorism. Flynn has also labeled Iran as a threat to the United States, and, like Trump, wants to tear up the Obama administration's landmark nuclear agreement with Tehran.

Whether Trump decides to follow through on ending the nuclear deal could have a major impact on Kazakhstan, which has made nuclear nonproliferation a centerpiece of its foreign policy. Following the collapse the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan gave up its inherited nuclear weapons and has since parlayed its nuclear-free status into diplomatic outreach. According to Nazarbayev's official biography, the president resisted calls from other world leaders, including former Libyan President Muammar al-Qaddafi, to keep the warheads, but instead elected to give them up in exchange for "international recognition, respectability, investment and security."

Given Trump and Flynn's views on the U.S. nuclear accord with Iran, Kazakhstan will likely be looking for new diplomatic avenues to limit the spread of nuclear weapons — especially if that means bending some important ears in the Trump White House. In an interview with Foreign Policy in April, Kazakh Foreign Minister Erlan Idrissov said that his country prized the nuclear accord as a positive achievement.

"We will play any role necessary to make sure the Iran deal stays in place," Idrissov said at the time.