

Remarks by H.E. Erlan Idrissov, Foreign Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan and first Hon. President of the Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs, on the occasion of the Second Annual Meeting of the ECFA Advisory Council at 6pm on Wednesday 2nd December 2015 at the Imperial Hotel, Vienna

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**Central Asia and the European Union
– A Partnership for Peace and Security**

I would like to thank our very distinguished old friend, and the Chair of the Advisory Council of the Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs, Dr. Benita Ferrero-Waldner, for her generous introductory remarks. It comes as no surprise that you, the former Foreign Minister of Austria, should be at the centre of this gathering here in Vienna, for it was your country that led the way in developing the concept of European Union, at the 1815 Congress of Vienna, and I find it very fitting that so many EU nations are represented at the table this evening under your accomplished and committed chairmanship.

Vienna is also home to many OSCE institutions, and I find it fitting that this event occurs here on the eve of the OSCE's Foreign Minister's meeting in Belgrade tomorrow.

It was five years ago exactly that Kazakhstan marked its unprecedented chairmanship of the OSCE with the adoption of the Astana Commemorative Declaration, in which leaders from around the world committed themselves to a “vision of a free, democratic, common and indivisible Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security community stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok, rooted in agreed principles, shared commitments and common goals.”

The Astana Declaration is more relevant now than ever, as we see crises in international relations that make the need for better understanding and more robust and trustful dialogue among all countries in Europe and Eurasia even more dire.

My Lord, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank all of you for your participation in the Second Annual Meeting of the Advisory Council. I am very grateful for such a splendid attendance since our formal launch just a year ago. As we have heard in the Director's Report, a great deal of effort has been invested in building the Council in the last twelve months and we have much by which to be encouraged. I look forward to further exciting developments in the year ahead.

It falls to our Chair to deliver the keynote speech this evening at dinner with many old friends, Ambassadors and representatives of European institutions that have played an important role in helping Central Asia to grow since Independence. I will therefore make some remarks at this Board Meeting that I hope may be of interest you, dear friends, in light of the deep experience and wide range of knowledge that is gathered around this table. After that I very much hope that there will be a general discussion and that you will offer your own thoughts and advice.

In recent weeks, Central Asia has found itself at the forefront of international diplomacy. Last month saw the historic visits to all five Central Asian states of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and of US Secretary of State John Kerry, to discuss matters of bilateral importance and reaffirm the Western powers' interests in the region.

Immediately after that, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the President of Kazakhstan, made official visits to the United Kingdom and France to meet with world leaders in the context of Kazakhstan's recent accession to the World Trade Organisation. Both visits were tremendous successes. I would like especially to thank our British friends here today for a very warm welcome. We met Her Majesty and every courtesy was extended to our delegation by the Prime Minister, David Cameron.

My country also is about to sign an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union on Dec. 21 this year, further highlighting the growing ties between Central Asia and the EU. It seems as if the birth of the ECFA could not have been more well judged.

Kazakhstan has worked hard since Independence to achieve its current status not only as the fastest-growing economy in Central Asia but also as a peaceful country and, increasingly, a trusted mediator and problem-solver on the regional and international stage. As such, we have been very active in our efforts to encourage peace through diplomatic engagement wherever our role might be considered useful and welcome.

That is why, following the successful P5+1 negotiations in Almaty on Iran's nuclear program in 2013, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted two rounds of talks among Syrian opposition leaders earlier this year in an attempt to defuse the conflict which, sadly, appears to be raging further and further out of the control of its original combatants, with tragic human consequences. At the same time, Kazakhstan has assisted the Western powers to implement the Istanbul Process and repatriate military equipment from post-war Afghanistan. It is crucial that there should be peace in Afghanistan and this is an issue that, as you can imagine, occupies much of our time as the departure date of the NATO troops approaches.

Central Asia is also playing a growing role in the international community's fight against terrorism, having played host to several counter-terrorism conferences and assisted in the development of policies designed to expunge extremist factions from the region. We, in Kazakhstan, were deeply shocked by a recent spate of deadly terrorist attacks in Beirut, Mali, Paris and on a Russian airliner over Sinai. We expressed our firm position denouncing terrorism in all forms and manifestations and calling for the international community's unity in fighting this scourge.

In regards to our region's relevance in global affairs, I would note that it has become increasingly popular for journalists and outside commentators to see events in our region through the prism of a revival of the Great Game in Central Asia. It is through this narrative of major powers fighting for influence that recent visits by the leaders of China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Japan, as well as the U.S. Secretary of State are seen.

I can see why this makes a neat headline, but that does not make it true. Kazakhstan is not a silent bystander in anyone else's strategy. We are a country successfully making its own independent way in the world.

We have purposely built good relations and strong economic ties with countries, big and small, to the east and west, south and north. We have close links with both Russia and China. Europe is our biggest trading partner and the US our second biggest foreign investor after Europe.

This is not an accident but the result of our multi-vector foreign policy. Our economic progress - which has seen our GDP rise 19-fold since independence - is also based on being open to trade, investment and

ideas. This commitment continues which is why, in the last year, we have helped found the Eurasian Economic Union and become full members of the WTO.

Far from being at the centre of a re-run of the Great Game, Kazakhstan is, if you like, at the heart of what could be a Great Gain for all in terms of regional and global stability and prosperity, and is adamantly promoting this vision for all to embrace. This is why, in the last couple of months alone, President Nazarbayev has held extremely productive meetings with President Xi Jinping, President Vladimir Putin, President Barack Obama, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe - and has had very successful back-to-back visits to London and Paris as well.

These countries and their leaders all want to strengthen their relationships with Kazakhstan - as we do with them - as a partner and friend. As Secretary Kerry explained, for example, the U.S. is not pursuing a “zero-sum game” in central Eurasia but believes greater engagement by all will benefit all. This is a message which we wholeheartedly welcome and which I hope all those watching and commenting on Kazakhstan will hear.

Curiously, at the same time, we can continue to see the focus, when discussing Central Asia, on how remote the region is. It is again a narrative which neglects how our world has changed. For as economic power shifts eastwards, bringing revived trade links, fast-growing markets and new areas of prosperity, it is not our remoteness but our position at the heart of the new emerging world which is most striking.

It is Kazakhstan’s size and unique geography which are enabling us to provide a land bridge linking the economic powerhouses to the east and west. It is an opportunity that, together with our partners, we are working hard to maximise.

New road links will cut by more than half the time it takes goods to be shipped by sea between China and Europe. Modern rail and road connections - linking to new port facilities on the Persian Gulf - are also providing fresh opportunities for trade and new markets to the south.

These developments form part of the \$9 billion domestic investment in improved connectivity that we are making through the Nurlı Zhol - or Bright Path - programme which, through major infrastructure spending, is Kazakhstan’s version of the New Deal. More importantly, these connectivity lines will not only serve just as transit “conduits” between

east and west, north and south but will come as life-lines for local communities all along the way in terms of creating and boosting local markets, empowering local businesses and private sectors, thus promoting well-being and prosperity, peace and stability in the entire area.

The idea of Central Asia linking east and west and being at the heart of global trade is not new. We have played this role for many centuries. And it was one of the fathers of modern geopolitics - Sir Halford Mackinder - who spoke of our region as the 'Heartland' and predicted as far back as the turn of the last century that the old Silk Road would soon be revived "with a network of railways."

At that time, Sir Halford did not foresee the divisions in our world caused by war and ideology, which put a brake on cooperation in the heart of Eurasia for decades. But as the divisions disappear, his predictions are finally coming true as the ancient Silk Road is rebuilt and modernised. Our geography is now an advantage not a disadvantage - enabling us not only to boost our economy but provide a wealth of opportunities for the region and wider world. So, the common goal should be to turn Central Asia from being landlocked into being land-linked and a connecting bridge between continents, cultures and trade.

I would also like to remind you that Kazakhstan – the first time for a Central Asian state – is a serious contender for a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council in 2017 – 18. The four main pillars of our bid – food security, water security, energy security and nuclear security – illustrate our commitment to the peaceful resolution of the main challenges facing Europe and the world today, before these issues become intractable bones of contention, or even unsolvable.

Kazakhstan has made several concrete steps to help realise the United Nations Human Rights Council's proposals for ensuring water and food security at both individual and community levels, not just in Central Asia, but also around the world. Food and water security have become increasingly pressing issues in the EU, as thousands of refugees from Syria and other regions in conflict look set to face a harsh winter in an unknown land. Kazakhstan's commitment to humanitarian aid will surely be recognised and, we hope, witnessed on the ground as this desperate situation develops. In this regard, I would like to inform you of the ongoing implementation of Kazakhstan's initiative to establish an Islamic Organisation for Food Security (IOFS), under the aegis of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation next year in Astana.

The third pillar of our UNSC bid – energy security – is the cornerstone of both our relationship with the European Union and of our Kazakhstan 2050 Strategy. We do not take our responsibilities as a major producer of hydrocarbons lightly, and have made great headway as a producer of alternative, “green” energy as well. The focus of the upcoming EXPO 2017 exhibition in Astana – set to showcase the work of many EU nations and participants, among others – will carry the theme “Future Energy”. We look forward to welcoming many leading lights from the energy sector in our capital city.

The final pillar of our bid is that of nuclear security – a major priority for the EU and indeed the rest of the world. President Nazarbayev recently stated that: “A world without nuclear weapons should be the main goal of humanity in the 21st century”. Ever since Kazakhstan voluntarily renounced its arsenal of more than 1,400 nuclear warheads at Independence, my country has been a leading campaigner for nuclear disarmament worldwide. I am glad to announce that we are seeing great support for our President’s proposal to adopt, within the United Nations, a Universal Declaration on the Achievement of a Nuclear Weapons Free World and we expect a vote on this resolution shortly.

This year Kazakhstan signed an agreement with the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency to host the world’s first Bank of Low Enriched Uranium, allowing safe access to low-enriched uranium to those countries that need it. This will help curb the trend of nuclear proliferation while boosting possibilities for peaceful use of nuclear energy.

Kazakhstan has made impressive progress in achieving the eight Millennium Development Goals set out by the UN – life expectancy has risen, GDP per capita has increased exponentially, and poverty and infant mortality rates have both declined sharply. President Nazarbayev recently visited New York for the 70th General Assembly of the United Nations to share his ambitious vision for a post-2015 agenda and the adoption of Sustainable Development Goals going forward.

He proposed, among other measures, that each state allocate one per cent of its defence budget annually to a Special UN Fund for Sustainable Development, arguing that: “In the 21st century successful countries will be distinguished not by arsenals of weapons, but by the ability to generate innovation and to win friends and forge partnerships.” At heart, therefore, let me clearly underline that it is this peaceful approach that

Kazakhstan would seek to advance as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

Multi-ethnic but strong and united, increasingly prosperous yet seeing the country's wealth trickle down to all its citizens, and adopting a peaceful posture not just towards its immediate neighbours but to all its partners – to me, the approach that has been adopted by Kazakhstan reflects many of Central Asia's key values. I believe these qualities are increasingly catching the eye of the West and earning the region a fledgling, but well-deserved, reputation among European nations as a trusted political and economic ally lying at the crossroads of East and West.

One thing is for sure – the European Union should seek to meet this new reality head-on, and build bilateral ties with the countries of Central Asia that can help develop both our regions to the best of our abilities and resources. This is why the work of the ECFA, and your valuable contribution in participating in this organisation as Members of its Advisory Council, are so important.

I would like to conclude by, once again, expressing my sincere gratitude to you all for your participation in this important new institution. It will surely grow and when it does, it will be thanks to your commitment and individual contributions.

I hope you enjoy the rest of the evening, and continue to support the Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs as it seeks to further develop and expand and grow its activities.
Thank you for your attention!