

# Kazakhstan seeks peace, international prosperity in year of turmoil

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The last 12 months have been another disappointing year for all who want to see peace, prosperity and co-operation in our world. We must hope future historians, when they look back at 2018, can see the beginning of positive trends. But without the benefit of this hindsight, there seems little to cheer on the global stage as we enter the final days of the year.

There have, of course, been areas of progress. Tensions over North Korea's nuclear weapons programme, which had loomed so large earlier in the year, have been reduced thanks to face-to-face talks. But on too many other international issues, we are seeing positions entrenched. There seems to have been little appetite to overcome obstacles to progress.

Syria's tragedy, with terrible consequences for its people, is approaching its ninth year. The conflict in Yemen may have been shorter but the United Nations warns it has already sparked a humanitarian catastrophe. Fighting continues, too, in Libya as it does, sadly, in Afghanistan.

These conflicts are having an impact well beyond their borders. As we have said before, they are encouraging violent extremism which has again been responsible for terrorist attacks this year in cities many hundreds of miles away as we sadly saw in Strasbourg again this month. They have also forced millions to flee the fighting and lack of opportunities bringing both difficulties to the families concerned and the pressures on those communities and countries where they seek refuge.

What also continues to be a major concern is how these conflicts have drawn in other countries, leading to increased divisions and suspicions. The result is that instead of the cooperation we need to see on the international stage to tackle shared challenges, we are witnessing rivalry and distrust.

These same factors have had a damaging impact on the global economy. Trade wars, protectionist tendencies and the imposition of economic sanctions for political reasons have all acted as brakes on global growth and prosperity in 2018.

Given this worrying background, it would be easy for countries, such as Kazakhstan, to retreat from their faith in the rules-based international order and the need for international cooperation. But a look back at what has happened in 2018 shows Kazakhstan has stayed true to the principles which have underpinned its foreign policy since independence.

Through its position as a member of the UN Security Council, it has worked tirelessly to promote peace and dialogue. The main focus of Kazakhstan's efforts, especially during its one month presidency January, as promised, has been on the steps needed to remove the threat of nuclear weapons from our world. Priority was also given to increasing international support for Afghanistan, which is so important to the stability of Central Asia.

The 6th Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions showed a continued commitment to increasing understanding between the great faiths and preventing their abuse by extremists. Well over 70 countries have already backed Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev's initiative by signing the Code of Conduct Towards Achieving a World Free of Terrorism.

Astana, too, has continued to host talks to try to find the basis for a solution to the Syrian crisis. It is a difficult and challenging process but it has also underlined Kazakhstan's commitment to playing its full part in ending conflict whenever it can.

At the same time, Kazakhstan has taken the regional lead both in deepening links across Central Asia and the Turkic world and in demonstrating the positive benefits of cooperation. The country's involvement in the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative are now helping drive increased trade and growth.

The launch of the Astana International Financial Centre is beginning to pull in additional investment into the region. Major strides have also been taken with neighbouring countries to put in place the legal framework for the sustainable development and protection of the Caspian Sea and to step up efforts to tackle the Aral Sea's environmental disaster.

These efforts have been spearheaded by President Nazarbayev himself on a series of high-profile visits. Over the course of the year, he has travelled to the United States, China, Russia, Turkey and Brussels as well as widely across the region while also welcoming dozens of fellow leaders to Astana. He remains a respected voice on the international stage and a strong advocate of peace and cooperation.

It is these goals which, as we approach 2019, we must all hope move to the top of the international agenda. They remain, wherever we live, our best hope of the happier and more hopeful new year we all want for our families.