



Kazakhstan's Echo

A publication of the Embassy of Kazakhstan to the USA and Canada
with views and comments on developments in and around Kazakhstan

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August 21, 2006

No. 28

The Washington Times

www.washingtontimes.com

Kazakhstan's example

Denuclearization is the way to go

By Kanat Saudabayev

Published August 21, 2006, Page A17

The international tensions over Iran's nuclear program and the global outcry over recent missile tests by North Korea and its nuclear weapons program, coupled with the growing threat of international terrorists acquiring nuclear weapons, have again shown the world the importance of strengthening the efforts for nuclear nonproliferation. In order to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, the world must learn from the experience of Kazakhstan, which has proven that the one path to true security and prosperity lies through nuclear disarmament and the promotion of peaceful relations with the world.

In the early 1990s, Kazakhstan inherited from the Soviet Union more than 1,000 nuclear warheads with yields equivalent to one megaton of TNT each. Kazakhstan then became the first country in the world to voluntarily renounce these deadly weapons, which at that time constituted the world's fourth-largest nuclear arsenal, larger than those of Great Britain, France and China combined.

Despite urgings from some of Kazakhstan's "well-wishers," who offered financial assistance in return for our keeping the nuclear weapons and becoming the world's first Muslim nuclear power, and despite the huge temptation to turn overnight from an obscure country into an influential member of the nuclear club, President Nursultan Nazarbayev took the decision to voluntarily and permanently rid Kazakh soil of nuclear weapons.

This was not the first bold anti-nuclear act by the Kazakh leader. Earlier, when the Soviet Union was still there and despite threats from the Kremlin, he shut down the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site in eastern Kazakhstan. During the four decades that the Semipalatinsk test site existed, it became the world's second-largest nuclear test site. The Soviet Union conducted more than 450 nuclear tests there, contaminating an area comparable in size to New Mexico and ruining the lives of 1.5 million people who lived there. At the time of Mr. Nazarbayev's decision, it was comparable to the governor of Nevada ordering the shutdown of the U.S. nuclear test site in his state.

Since regaining our independence in 1991, Kazakhstan, in cooperation with the United States under the Nunn-Lugar program, has removed all nuclear weapons from its lands and eliminated the test site's infrastructure. Last month, the House of Representatives declared in a unanimous resolution that "Kazakhstan's leadership and cooperation with the United States on nonproliferation matters is a model for other countries to follow."

Kazakhstan's leadership in nuclear disarmament and preventing the spread of nuclear weapons takes on increasing importance as the global community works to reduce the threats of catastrophic terrorism. As former Sen. Sam Nunn said, "The threat of nuclear terrorism puts us in a race between cooperation and catastrophe. The kind of cooperation we see again and again from Kazakhstan can help us win that race."

We now implement important new projects in partnership with the international community. One such project was completed earlier this year by the Washington-based Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), and Kazakhstan's national atomic company, KazAtomProm. Together, they blended down almost three tons of highly enriched uranium -- enough for two dozen atomic bombs in the wrong hands -- to become fuel for peaceful uses.

This project, carried out under the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) safeguards, has shown the best way of ensuring nuclear security and preventing problem states and terrorists from obtaining nuclear weapons. It is this method, blending down highly enriched uranium and preventing its use as fissile material, the key component of nuclear weapons, which was successfully implemented in Kazakhstan. IAEA Director-General Mohammed ElBaradei said of the project that "the NTI-Kazakhstan effort could well serve as a model for future projects in other countries."

Throughout the years of independence Kazakhstan, a secular Muslim-majority and democratically developing nation, has been a strong advocate of peace and nonproliferation and a firm and consistent opponent of all forms of weapons of mass destruction. After a decade and a half of these efforts, it became clear that by voluntarily giving up nuclear weapons and promoting peaceful relations with the world, Kazakhstan has ensured conditions for the development and prosperity of its people.

Kazakhstan's strong economic growth in recent years, attracting \$45 billion in foreign investment, and the improvement of living standards for our people are powerful and convincing arguments that Kazakhstan has gained, not lost, from renouncing nuclear weapons. This is what former U.N. chief weapons inspector Hans Blix had in mind when he said in June at the United Nations, "The first line of defense against the spread of nuclear weapons is indeed to make states feel that they don't need them," and that security must be rooted in foreign policy, not military action.

Countries of the world can gain if they follow Kazakhstan's example and make the non-nuclear-weapons choice. We urge them to do that. That is the only way we can ensure a more peaceful and secure future for our children.

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