



Kazakhstan News Bulletin

Released weekly by the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the USA and Canada
www.kazakhembus.com

August 25, 2006

Vol. 6, No. 32

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United States Seeks To Be “Engine for Change” in Central Asia

(The following is a story by Louise Fenner which appeared on The Washington File on August 23, 2006)

The United States wants to be an “engine for change” in Central Asia, supporting the development of democratic, stable and prosperous nations and encouraging them to seek new economic opportunities “in every direction on the compass,” said a senior U.S. official in Almaty, Kazakhstan, August 23.

“Kazakhstan and its neighbors are poised to seize unprecedented economic opportunities,” Evan A. Feigenbaum, the deputy assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian affairs, told a conference on U.S.-Kazakh relations. “For Central Asia, this promise is best achieved to the degree that governments and peoples think and act as an integrated region.”

Feigenbaum said the United States seeks to assure security in the region, to promote economic change and regional integration, and to promote democratic reform.

In addition to supporting integration among the five Central Asian republics, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the United States is encouraging a broader integration of the region with Afghanistan and South Asia, according to Feigenbaum.

“We are promoting options and opportunities omni-directionally, but increasingly to the south, the least developed direction,” he said. “We want not merely to support economic development along this north-south axis, but also to afford Afghanistan access to a wider world, thus becoming a bridge where once it was a barrier.

“In this vision, the United States wants to be the convener. A facilitator. An engine for change,” Feigenbaum said.

“Of course, Kazakhstan will have a growing role in all of this,” he continued. “Our two countries share an interest in the free movement of energy, people, goods, and information from the Kazakh steppes to the sea.”

“Our policy is not ‘anti-’ anyone. Nor is it focused in any single direction to the exclusion of any other,” Feigenbaum said. “Rather, as Secretary Rice has said, it is to give impetus to a ‘corridor of reform’ extending southward to Afghanistan and the Indian Ocean, even as the region’s ties expand eastward to China, Japan, Korea, and the Pacific Rim.”

Feigenbaum added that “while looking for these new opportunities to the south, the United States firmly supports maintaining and expanding Central Asia’s robust ties to the Euro-Atlantic community.”

The United States is “deeply committed” to Central Asia and “committed for the long haul,” he said.

Participants at the conference discussed the U.S. role in developing Kazakhstan’s energy industry, prospects for supplying oil to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, bilateral trade, U.S. support for Kazakhstan’s World Trade Organization accession, U.S. investment outside the energy sector, and promotion of security in Central Asia and the Caspian region.

The conference was sponsored by the Institute of World Economy and Policy at the First Kazakhstan President Foundation in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in collaboration with the U.S. Embassy in Almaty and the AES Corporation.

Kazakhstan, China Hold Joint Antiterrorism Exercise

Kazakhstan and China launched the first phase of a joint anti-terrorism exercise in Kazakhstan’s eastern Almaty region on August 24.

Law enforcement bodies and special services of the two countries participate in the exercise, named “Tianshan-I(2006)”. The three day of exercises will take place in Kazakhstan’s Almaty region and the western Chinese city of Yining in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

It is one of the first joint anti-terrorism exercises between the two countries’ law enforcement bodies and special forces within the framework of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

At the recent Shanghai summit, SCO members, China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, announced the organization would also hold joint antiterrorism drills in 2007.

Things to Watch:

- Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi will visit Kazakhstan on August 28 on the first step of his visit to Central Asia. His talks with President Nursultan Nazarbayev will focus on regional development and security, as well as energy issues. Japan is seeking greater engagement in the region and has already initiated a “Central Asia plus Japan” cooperative dialog some years back.
- Kazakhstan will commemorate its grim nuclear weapons testing legacy on August 29, the 15th anniversary of the closing of the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site in eastern Kazakhstan. The Soviet Union detonated 456 nuclear and thermonuclear devices there damaging the lives of 1.3 million people.
- Both houses of Kazakhstan’s Parliament will convene on September 1 for the opening of their new session. President Nazarbayev will open the session with a major address.

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Contact person: Roman Vassilenko
1401 16th Street NW, Washington, DC 20036
Tel: 202 232 5488, ext. 104, Fax: 202 232 5845