Throughout its post-Soviet existence as an independent state, Kazakhstan has pursued a “multi-vectored” foreign policy aimed at balancing relations with its large neighbors, Russia and China, as well as with the global superpower, the United States. In the early years following the country’s 1991 independence, Kazakhstan’s main goal was to use Russia and China to balance each other in an effort to strengthen Kazakhstan’s own sovereignty. Kazakhstan gradually sought closer ties with the United States in order to provide additional balance. Then Foreign Minister Kassymzhomart Tokayev outlined these principles in his 1997 book, Pod Styagom Nezavisimosti (Under the Banner of Independence). Recent events have shown this strategy in action. In July 2006, Kazakhstan agreed to ship up to 500,000 barrels of oil per day by tanker across the Caspian Sea to Baku, Azerbaijan. From there, the oil would be shipped west via the new Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, bypassing Russia, as the United States and European countries sought. Astana also expressed interest in building a trans-Caspian pipeline if the project were to become economically feasible. In September 2006, Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev made an official visit to Washington. Despite concerns about Kazakhstan’s democratic shortcomings, President George W. Bush thanked Nazarbayev for his cooperation on a range of issues and stressed both countries’ “commitment to institutions that will enable liberty to flourish.” In November 2007, Kazakhstan received approval to chair the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010.
In May 2007, the presidents of Russia, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan agreed to build a new gas pipeline along the coast of the Caspian Sea to carry Central Asian gas supplies north to Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin said the new pipeline would carry at least 20 billion cubic meters by 2012. The leaders also agreed to expand an existing gas pipeline from Central Asia to Russia. Many analysts viewed the decision as a triumph for Russia’s efforts to tighten control over Central Asian gas exports, as well as a blow to Western hopes that Turkmen gas and Kazakh oil eventually would flow across the Caspian Sea through new pipelines. Nazarbayev also pledged that Russia would remain Kazakhstan’s top oil export route.

In August 2007, Nazarbayev attended the annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Kyrgyzstan. The SCO, whose members are Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, caught the world’s attention two years earlier during its summit in Kazakhstan, when it issued a joint declaration calling for the United States to establish a timetable for the withdrawal of the military bases it established in Central Asia following the 2001 terrorist attacks. Shortly after the SCO declaration, Uzbekistan, stung by Western criticism of its bloody crackdown on protesters in the eastern city of Andijon, evicted U.S. forces. These events led to concern that the SCO could develop into an anti-Western “dictator’s club.” During the 2007 summit, Nazarbayev called for the creation of a unified SCO energy market. Nazarbayev and other SCO leaders also observed the final stage of joint military exercises in Russia.

At the summit’s conclusion, Nazarbayev hosted Chinese President Hu Jintao in Astana, where the two countries agreed to build pipelines to carry Caspian oil and gas to China. One stage of a Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline, the Aksu-Alashankou line, was completed in December 2005. The aim is to extend this line from central Kazakhstan to the Caspian Sea, connecting China to the energy-rich Caspian seabed. A gas pipeline capable of carrying up to 30 billion cubic meters would deliver gas to China from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. These deals were another move in Kazakhstan’s strategy of diversifying its energy export routes, though analysts noted that the majority of Kazakhstan’s oil still would flow through Russia.

Kazakhstan’s multi-vector foreign policy, featuring such deft outreach to each of the three major external powers with interests in Central Asia, has helped to establish the country’s security, no small task given the potential security threats Kazakhstan has faced. For several reasons, Kazakhstan is a strategically important country whose foreign policy strategy merits close examination. Kazakhstan is located in a geopolitically vital region at the
crossroads of Europe and Asia. Although Kazakhstan has been largely unaffected by radical Islam, its proximity to countries that have struggled with this problem makes it a key actor in the global war on terrorism. Kazakhstan boasts Central Asia’s most dynamic economy, with growth of at least 8 percent per year since 2000. Kazakhstan also possesses vast energy resources. The U.S. Energy Information Administration estimates Kazakhstan’s total onshore and offshore proven oil reserves at between 9 billion and 40 billion barrels and its proven natural gas reserves at between 65 trillion and 100 trillion cubic feet.

This article examines Kazakhstan’s relations with Russia, China, and the United States. All three of these countries remain significantly more powerful than Kazakhstan, but Astana’s balancing strategy provides leverage over each. Despite its emphasis on good relations with each of these three major powers, Kazakhstan ranks its foreign policy priorities quite clearly. Relations with Russia are most important, followed closely by China, and then by the United States, the European Union, the other Central Asian countries, and finally, by other Asian countries.

Several recent developments call into question Kazakhstan’s ability to maintain a balance among the three major powers. These developments include a souring of U.S.-Russian relations, continuing tension in U.S.-Chinese relations, and the development of closer ties between Russia and China based upon common opposition to U.S. hegemony. Nevertheless, foreign policy analysts from Kazakhstan argue that their country’s multi-vector foreign policy is flexible enough to endure the turbulence of great-power politics. This article examines the prospects for Kazakhstan’s strategy and concludes with policy recommendations for the United States. Despite the priority Kazakhstan places on relations with Russia and China, the United States and Kazakhstan share key common interests. Kazakhstan’s effective conduct of a flexible, balanced foreign policy suits U.S. interests well.

Kazakhstan’s Relations with Russia

If Russia represents Kazakhstan’s top foreign policy priority, then Kazakhstan also holds special strategic significance for Russia. Russia views the post-Soviet states, or its “Near Abroad,” as a zone of special importance to its national security. Russia’s early hopes of establishing powerful economic and military influence in Central Asia went largely unfulfilled by the mid-1990s owing to Russian weakness. However, Russia’s recent economic and geopolitical revival, fueled largely by high oil prices, has encouraged its ambitions to play a stronger role in Central Asia. For several reasons, including ethnic,
cultural, linguistic, demographic, and geographic, Kazakhstan among former Soviet states is especially important for policymakers in Moscow.\textsuperscript{20}

Russia has several security and economic interests in Central Asia. Moscow seeks to maintain Central Asia within its zone of geopolitical influence and encourage Central Asian countries to participate in processes of integration with Russia.\textsuperscript{21} Russia has sought to bring these states into a single defense and security organization under its exclusive control and to exclude the West.\textsuperscript{22} Russian analysts seek to counteract what they view as the chief U.S. foreign policy goal in the region: edging Russia out of the Caucasus and Central Asia.\textsuperscript{23} Russia seeks to secure its vulnerable southern border against numerous threats emanating from Central Asia, including Islamic extremism, drug trafficking, and illegal migration.\textsuperscript{24} In this respect, Kazakhstan’s cooperation is essential.

Russia also seeks to strengthen its economic position in the region. In particular, Moscow seeks to use energy policies to strengthen its influence. It has sought a leading role in the development of offshore Caspian oil and gas reserves, dominance in Central Asia’s gas industry, and control of the region’s hydroelectric power.\textsuperscript{25} Moscow hopes to use Gazprom, the largely state-controlled Russian gas monopoly, and its strong position in Central Asia as the basis for a gas union in the former Soviet region.\textsuperscript{26} Russia would consider any third party’s domination over Kazakhstan, Central Asia’s largest economy and largest state by territorial size, to be unacceptable.\textsuperscript{27}

Russia is Kazakhstan’s top foreign policy priority for several reasons. The border between Russia and Kazakhstan stretches 6,846 km\textsuperscript{12}, constituting the longest land border in the world. Despite substantial outward migration since the breakup of the Soviet Union, more than 4 million of Kazakhstan’s 15 million people are ethnic Russians.\textsuperscript{29} Russia’s potential ability to pressure Kazakhstan by raising the concerns of ethnic Russians is a major worry for Kazakhstan’s leaders.\textsuperscript{30} In addition, around 1 million ethnic Kazakhs live in Russia.\textsuperscript{31} Around 95 percent of Kazakhstan’s population speaks Russian.\textsuperscript{32} Tight economic ties between Russia and Kazakhstan further increase Russia’s importance for policymakers in Astana. Russia is in a strong position to provide Kazakhstan with economic, political, and military aid. As long as Russia seeks to assert its interests in Central Asia, Kazakhstan must be sensitive to Russia’s desires. In the words of one of Kazakhstan’s leading foreign policy

relations with russia are most important, followed closely by china and then the u.s.
Russia’s most important interests in Central Asia, including its relations with Kazakhstan, focus on strategic and security concerns. In particular, Russia seeks to integrate Central Asian states into Russian-led security structures and to establish these countries as allies while denying external actors strategic access to Central Asia. Russia has sought to use integration within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), including this body’s Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), to strengthen its control over Central Asian security. The 2001 terrorist attacks and the U.S. response interrupted these efforts, as the United States and its allies established military bases in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to support operations in Afghanistan. Russia supported the U.S.-led campaign to topple the Taliban and pursue al-Qaeda, but this did not mean Russia would support a long-term U.S. military presence in Central Asia.

Russia responded to this new U.S. presence by strengthening its own. In November 2002, Russia opened an air base in Kyrgyzstan, supplementing its existing base in Tajikistan. Subsequently, Russia strengthened both bases. Russia’s security goals in Central Asia include improving air defense, extending joint training, enhancing rapid reaction forces, and strengthening ties among the military-industrial complexes of CSTO member countries. Uzbekistan, the Central Asian country possessing the greatest military potential, withdrew from the CSTO in 1999 but returned in 2006 following the rupture in its relations with the United States. Russia fears NATO encroachment on the CIS, a major reason for its opposition to NATO expansion into East Central Europe. Russia also has sought to expand cooperation with China through the SCO. Like Russia, China was wary of a long-term U.S. military presence in Central Asia. China and the four Central Asian members supported the SCO’s July 2005 declaration on U.S. military bases, but Russia appears to have been the driving force.

Russia’s desire to play a strong security role places pressure on Kazakhstan’s foreign policy, but Kazakhstan responds in typically multi-vectored fashion. Like other Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan has not been prepared to sever security ties with Moscow. In fact, Russia remains Kazakhstan’s main security partner. Russia and Kazakhstan cooperate on a variety of security issues, including air defense, within the framework of the CSTO. Although Kazakhstan has resisted joint military activities with the CSTO, it participated in Central Asian war games under this organization’s rubric in August 2006. Russia is likely to increase pressure on Kazakhstan to integrate more deeply into a Russian-led security order, placing strain on Kazakhstan’s strategy of

commentators, “Byez Rossii, nel’zya” (“Without Russia, it’s impossible.”)
balance. Nevertheless, Kazakhstan’s participation in NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP) complicates its security relationship with Russia. To date, the CSTO remains ineffective because no Central Asian country, including Kazakhstan, is willing to trade its sovereignty for protection by Moscow.

Moreover, Kazakhstan’s participation in the SCO helps to maintain the balance of power between Russia and China in the region. The SCO offers both Russia and China an opportunity to restrain the other. Kazakhstan supported the SCO declaration on U.S. military bases because this was necessary in order to preserve the organization’s unity. In the words of a leading political analyst in Kazakhstan, it was an example of “brilliant political distancing.” Kazakhstan satisfied Russia and China by joining the declaration without aggravating its relations with the United States or NATO. Relations with the West remain sound because Kazakhstan has resisted efforts by Russia and China to use the organization to promote their broader geopolitical interests. Kazakhstan continues to develop military-political cooperation with both the SCO and NATO, and it recognizes the importance of NATO-led efforts to establish security in Afghanistan.

Despite Uzbekistan’s eviction of U.S. forces, the United States has retained access to its base in Kyrgyzstan. The SCO’s declaration on U.S. bases was an assertion of the organization’s growing significance, but it did not represent a larger effort to balance U.S. power through a military alliance. The rise of an anti-American, Sino-Russian alliance would force Kazakhstan to make difficult decisions, placing its multi-vectored foreign policy under strain. However, the competing regional interests of Russia and China make such an alliance unlikely. Thus, in the near term, Kazakhstan should be able to continue its multi-vectored foreign policy.

Economic interests are another key component of the Russia-Kazakhstan relationship. At independence, Kazakhstan was more economically dependent on Russia than any other former Soviet republic, especially in its northern regions. In order for its economy to survive, Kazakhstan had to ship a substantial amount of goods to, or through, Russia. Although Kazakhstan has reduced its economic dependence on Russia, bilateral economic ties remain important. In 2006, the volume of Russia-Kazakhstan trade reached $12 billion, a 30 percent increase over 2005.

Russia’s greatest economic leverage was in the energy sector, as Moscow initially held a monopoly over oil and gas pipelines. Until 2001, Kazakhstan exported nearly all of its oil through the Atyrau-Samara pipeline, a northbound link into the Russian distribution system. This left Kazakhstan...
vulnerable to Moscow, and Kazakhstan responded by seeking to reduce its dependence. During the 1990s, the Chevron-led Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) developed a 980-mile pipeline connecting Kazakhstan’s oil deposits near the Caspian with the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk. Although this pipeline transports oil through Russia, the consortium operates independently of Transneft, Russia’s state oil-pipeline monopoly, thus reducing dependence on Moscow. Since 2001, the CPC has transported about one-third of Kazakhstan’s exports, mostly from the Tengiz field, and its capacity is set to grow.

Kazakhstan still exports three-fourths of its oil through Russian territory. Russian oil companies also play an important role in the production of Kazakh oil, with Lukoil planning to produce 70 million barrels by 2010 and state-owned Rosneft producing oil at the Kurmangazy field. Some analysts argue that Russia is trying to establish maximum control over Kazakhstan’s oil. Even Kazakh officials who stress the importance of relations with Russia recognize that the two countries’ interests diverge over energy exports. Whereas Russia seeks to control the export of Kazakhstan’s oil, Kazakhstan needs to diversify its export routes. For now, with Kazakhstan’s oil and gas production set to surge, Nazarbayev pragmatically recognizes the need for reliance on Russia. This reflects the reality that the major pipelines running out of Kazakhstan still pass through Russian territory. Several obstacles stand in the way of new pipelines to the West. In the near term, China offers the best chance for diversifying Kazakhstan’s energy export routes. This is another example of how China plays an important role in Kazakhstan’s efforts to reduce pressure from its northern neighbor.

Kazakhstan’s Relations with China

China’s influence in Central Asia greatly increased following the Soviet Union’s collapse, as five relatively weak new states emerged with considerably less aggregate power than the Soviet Union had possessed. The emergence of a U.S. military presence in Central Asia beginning in 2001 marked a setback for this newfound Chinese influence. China’s top foreign policy priorities lie in the Asia-Pacific region, but Central Asia’s importance to China is likely to increase. If Russian influence in Central Asia were to fade, China probably would move to fill the void. For now, Russia and the United States can offer more immediate economic and security benefits to Central Asian countries. Yet China’s influence is likely to grow, based on geography and economics. Regardless of its relative influence, China has pursued a consistent set of objectives in Central Asia. These objectives grow naturally out of its overall
foreign policy strategy of nurturing an amicable international environment that allows it to focus on domestic modernization, economic growth, and social stability. China’s top priority in this region is to maintain stability along its borders. Thus, China used the SCO to reach border agreements with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

China pursues what two analysts have called a “long-term strategy of denial.” Under this strategy, China seeks to deny Central Asia as a base for Uighur separatism in Xinjiang. China also aims to deny regional dominance by any external power. It seeks to prevent the United States from using Central Asia to contain China, a concern that has risen since the establishment of a U.S. military presence. For Chinese policymakers, this presence raises the specter of “strategic encirclement” and possible U.S. use of the situation in Xinjiang to harm China’s interests. Like Russia, China supported U.S.-led operations against the Taliban but opposed a long-term U.S. military presence in Central Asia. China also seeks to deny Russia a monopoly of influence in the region. Thus, despite China’s close cooperation with Russia in the SCO, China does not agree that Central Asia is Russia’s “backyard.”

China also seeks expanded economic ties with the region, especially secure access to energy resources. China sees Central Asia’s energy resources as a means to help satisfy its rapidly growing demand while reducing its dependence on Middle Eastern sources shipped through waters patrolled by the U.S. Navy. Like Russia, China recognizes Kazakhstan as an especially important Central Asian country. Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan, mostly welcome China’s involvement in their region, despite concerns about China’s growing power. Any future government of Kazakhstan is likely to seek good relations with China. Kazakhstan’s development requires good relations with neighboring countries, and China’s economic dynamism offers especially valuable opportunities.

Although Russia remains Kazakhstan’s most important security partner, China’s role is growing. China and the Central Asian states have worked jointly to counter Uighur separatism. Potential instability in Xinjiang could cause China to seek closer security ties with Central Asian states, including Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan’s most important security interaction with China takes place within the SCO, in which China’s membership helps Kazakhstan balance Russia’s security presence, as discussed above.

China’s economic interests in Central Asia are growing. As with Russia, these focus largely on Kazakhstan. China’s “Develop the West” initiative, which the central government in Beijing views as essential for enhancing its
long-term ability to maintain authority over Xinjiang, depends on strengthened economic ties with Central Asia. China’s plans to upgrade rail and highway connections to Central Asia will increase its regional influence. Kazakhstan and China aim to increase their bilateral trade volume to $15 billion per year by 2015.

It is in the energy sphere that China offers especially valuable opportunities for Kazakhstan, as China provides an outlet for Kazakhstan’s oil and gas toward the Pacific. China offers the most immediate opportunity for Kazakhstan to diversify its energy export routes. For China, Kazakhstan offers an opportunity to gain ownership and relatively direct control over stable foreign oil supplies, as seen when Chinese state-owned oil companies won the right to develop oil fields at Aktyubinsk and Uzen. The Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has invested more than $6.5 billion in oil projects in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan has encouraged Chinese investment in the Kazakh energy sector, partly to lessen its dependence on Western oil firms. Most notably, CNPC recently acquired PetroKazakhstan, one of Kazakhstan’s largest producers. China invested more than $700 million in the construction of the first phase of the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline.

China values the stability of overland oil supplies, especially when its companies have a large measure of control, so it is willing to pay a “security fee” for such supplies. Pipelines to China are, therefore, more achievable in the medium term than trans-Caspian pipelines or Kazakhstan’s preferred route, an oil pipeline to Iran, which Western opposition has stymied. Kazakhstan plans to limit oil shipments through the Kazakhstan-China pipeline to 400,000 barrels per day, indicating an unwillingness to over-commit supplies to China. Yet Kazakhstan will continue to ship most of its oil through Russia. Nevertheless, this issue illustrates the crucial role China plays in Kazakhstan’s multi-vectorized foreign policy by relieving Russian pressure.

Yet Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries harbor concerns about China as a potential future hegemon. Like Russia, Kazakhstan is concerned about Chinese economic penetration and migration. Kazakhstan does not wish to become merely an economic appendage supplying raw materials to China. One source of future tension could be the use of water resources from the Ili and Irtysh rivers. Both rivers originate in China and flow into Kazakhstan. China’s “Develop the West” project has increased China’s water needs, but its growing use of water from these rivers could have negative consequences for Kazakhstan. In this case, Kazakhstan’s interests coincide with those of Russia, as the Irtysh also flows into Russia. These potential flashpoints serve as a reminder of why Kazakhstan values relations with
the United States as a hedge against possible future Chinese assertions of hegemony.

Kazakhstan's Relations with the United States

Since the Soviet Union’s collapse, U.S. policy toward Central Asia and Kazakhstan has passed through several phases. Initially, the United States was willing to grant Russia the leading regional security role. Kazakhstan occupied a central position in U.S. policy toward the region, as the main goal was to persuade Kazakhstan to relinquish its nuclear weapons, a task achieved by 1995. By the mid-1990s, as U.S.-Russian relations soured, the United States ceased to view Central Asia as a region of special Russian interests. U.S. interests expanded to include promoting democracy, encouraging Central Asian countries to adopt market reforms and integrate into global economic institutions, waging the struggles against terrorism and drug trafficking, and strengthening the sovereignty and security of the Central Asian countries. The United States also grew increasingly concerned about undemocratic developments in Kazakhstan. In 1995, Nazarbayev disbanded the parliament after a court declared the previous year’s elections unconstitutional. He then ruled by decree for more than a year before extending his term through a referendum, setting a pattern for subsequent backsliding on democracy. At the same time, U.S. policy toward Central Asia, previously focused on Kazakhstan, began to view Uzbekistan as a potential counterweight to Russian influence.

Kazakhstan’s large oil and gas reserves, however, ensured the country’s continued importance to U.S. policy. The United States became increasingly interested in securing U.S. companies’ access to Caspian energy development projects. This reflected not only lobbying by oil companies and the desire to promote global energy security, but also the U.S. goal of strengthening the newly independent states’ sovereignty. The United States sought to increase the supply of energy resources, prevent any state from holding a monopoly over Central Asian energy supplies, and exclude Iran. U.S. officials insisted they had no desire to establish a monopoly of influence or wage a new “Great Game.” Yet the United States clearly sought to help fill the geopolitical vacuum and to reduce the Central Asian states’ dependence on Russia, China, and Iran.

Another phase in U.S.-Kazakhstan relations, centering on security issues, began after September 2001, when the Central Asian states played a crucial role in the U.S.-led war on terrorism. The United States established military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan became the main U.S.
security partner in the region. During this period, the United States eased pressure on Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states regarding democracy and human rights. To support Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, Kazakhstan granted the United States emergency use of its airspace, though not a permanent military presence. In 2003, Kazakhstan sent a 27-member engineering team to clear mines in Iraq. As it had since early in its independence, Kazakhstan continued to participate in NATO’s PfP. This fell short of full security cooperation, but it allowed Kazakhstan to diversify its security partnerships, reduce pressure from Russia, and modernize its armed forces. In the view of NATO strategists, Kazakhstan believes that gradually strengthening its relations with NATO is worth the risk in its relations with Russia and China. NATO, in turn, recognizes Kazakhstan’s obligations within the CSTO and the SCO.

In the second half of 2005, foreign policy analysts from Kazakhstan detected a shift in U.S. strategy. Taking account of recent setbacks, this strategy adopted a more realistic approach. Specifically, following the rupture in relations with Uzbekistan, the United States placed greater emphasis on relations with Kazakhstan. With Kazakhstan’s December 2005 presidential election looming, Washington softened its criticism of Nazarbayev’s government. The United States did not attempt to promote a “color revolution,” an unlikely possibility in any case given Kazakhstan’s economic success and Nazarbayev’s popularity. In August 2005, Tokayev visited Washington, where he met with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Kazakhstan, Rice said, could serve as a model for other Central Asian states’ development, a message she reiterated during her visit to Kazakhstan that October.

The United States was moving toward a new strategy dubbed “Greater Central Asia.” This strategy aimed to build transport infrastructure, revive continental trade, and strengthen economic connections between Central Asia and U.S. allies in South Asia. As the largest provider of foreign direct investment into Kazakhstan, the United States wielded considerable influence with which to promote economic projects. The State Department created a new Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, which assumed responsibility for the five formerly Soviet Central Asian states. U.S. officials stressed that helping the Central Asian countries develop into strong, stable, sovereign states was a major U.S. goal. They also made clear that the United States sought to help the Central Asian states resist pressure from Russia and China by opening alternative trading routes to the south. Russia and China viewed the initiative warily, concerned that it could signal a long-term U.S. presence in the region. Supporters of the initiative countered that Russia and China too would benefit from improved regional infrastructure.
Nevertheless, the project faces significant hurdles. In addition to Russian and Chinese concerns, the Central Asian countries themselves have expressed uncertainty. Officially, Kazakhstan expressed its support, but Kazakh officials also noted several obstacles, including a lack of coordination among regional countries and the international community, continuing regional instability, and the lack of trans-border agreements on crucial issues such as water use. Thus, Kazakhstan supports the project in principle but questions its practicality. Continuing instability in Afghanistan could hinder efforts to expand infrastructural links to South Asia. Additional problems relate to road transport, air transport, banking and financial services, and energy.

The construction of three proposed pipelines—a Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan gas line, a trans-Afghanistan gas line, and a trans-Caspian Kazakhstan-Azerbaijan oil line—have been blocked by political disputes, security concerns, and low interest by investors.

The United States has encouraged Kazakhstan to increase its involvement in the BTC pipeline and eventually agree to the construction of a trans-Caspian pipeline. This would serve Western interests by providing an outlet for Kazakh oil that bypasses Russia. U.S. officials assert that the project also would serve Kazakhstan’s interest in diversifying oil export routes. To Russia’s consternation, Kazakhstan joined the BTC in June 2006, agreeing to make oil tanker shipments to Baku. Yet Kazakhstan has shown only mild interest in the project, emphasizing that it is just one possible option for exporting hydrocarbons. Kazakhstan's ambivalence reflects both economic and political considerations. Foreign policy experts in Kazakhstan argue that the Caspian littoral states’ failure to agree to the sea’s legal division is likely to prevent the pipeline’s construction. Since Russia and Iran are both Caspian littoral states, this could be a formidable obstacle. Many energy analysts, both in Kazakhstan and in the West, also question the BTC’s economic viability or consider the pipeline to China more important.

Despite these concerns, Kazakhstan’s involvement in the BTC is likely to grow. The project offers Kazakhstan potential economic benefits and an opportunity to diversify its export routes. Kazakhstan has various options for transporting Kashagan oil, including an expanded CPC or parallel line. Kazakhstan already ships oil from its Tengiz field through the CPC, so it may decide to ship Kashagan oil to the west.

Because Caspian oil tankers have low capacity, the construction of a seabed pipeline may be necessary to make the project commercially viable for Kazakhstan in the long run. The pipeline’s realization would face many ob-
stacles, including resistance from Russia and Iran, but a sustained push by the United States and Europe could bring the project to fruition eventually. Kazmunaigaz, the Kazakh state oil company, has reportedly been in discussions with the Azeri state oil company, SOCAR, on a trans-Caspian pipeline, indicating that Kazakhstan is seriously considering the project. Regardless, Kazakhstan continues to view the United States as an important element of its multi- vectored foreign policy.

Policy Recommendations for the United States

For the United States, Kazakhstan is an important country in a geopolitically crucial region. Recognizing its enduring interests in Central Asia, the United States should make a long-term commitment. It should pursue a region-wide approach while maintaining good bilateral relations with Kazakhstan and its neighbors. The most important U.S. objective in Central Asia should be to prevent this region from posing a threat to vital U.S. interests, especially to homeland security. The United States should seek to prevent outside powers, especially a single hegemonic power, from gaining dominance. Kazakhstan’s multi-vectored foreign policy serves U.S. interests by offering an opportunity for fruitful partnership that helps to limit the prospects for anti-American, Sino-Russian regional balancing in Central Asia.

Together, the United States, Russia, China, and the Central Asian countries should create an informal concert, or some similar arrangement, to encourage dialogue on security issues. These states share several interests, including the desire to eliminate threats from terrorism and Islamic radicalism. The United States should encourage the creation of a NATO-SCO strategic dialogue. This forum could promote cooperation on counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing, counter-narcotics, and economic development. Such an arrangement would ease Kazakhstan’s balancing act of maintaining security relationships with NATO, the CSTO, and the SCO.

Economic development is a priority for U.S.-Kazakhstan relations. The Central Asian countries need economic growth in order to strengthen their sovereignty, an interest they share with the United States. The Greater Central Asia project and efforts to expand regional trade are worth pursuing despite significant obstacles. The United States should continue to encourage Kazakhstan’s participation in the BTC oil pipeline. However, Kazakhstan’s increasing oil exports to China also serve U.S. interests in second-best fashion by helping to loosen Russia’s grip over Central Asian energy exports. This is another example of how Kazakhstan’s multi-vectored foreign policy coincides with U.S. interests.
Kazakhstan’s democratic shortcomings create the greatest strain in relations with the United States. Kazakhstan’s government seeks the security and economic benefits of partnership with the United States while limiting Western influence on its domestic politics, a source of frustration in Washington. In this respect, Nazarbayev’s government benefits from relations with Russia and China, which have no interest in democracy promotion. The United States should continue to promote democracy in Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries, not least because this is necessary for these states’ own long-term stability, but it should adhere to a realistic, long-term approach. Delivering harsh public lectures or downgrading relations would do little to promote democracy.

Instead, the United States should continue to engage in an ongoing, fair, and respectful discussion with Kazakhstan’s leaders, as well as with opposition leaders, on the need to implement democratic reforms. To cite one example of the benefits of this approach, engagement with Astana has helped improve the country’s legal system. The United States opposed Kazakhstan’s bid to chair the OSCE in 2009 but relented in late 2007, accepting Kazakhstan’s chairmanship in 2010. This decision was in some ways regrettable because of Kazakhstan’s failure to implement the very democratic reforms that the OSCE seeks to promote. However, it was consistent with a policy of engagement to promote democratic reforms. As long as the West defends the OSCE’s democratic mission and resists Russian efforts to weaken election monitoring, Kazakhstan’s chairmanship will not harm the organization. Engagement with Astana may yield minimal short-term results, but it is more likely to promote democracy in the long term than a policy of isolation. The United States need not choose between promoting democracy and pursuing its strategic interests in the region.

Kazakhstan has shown considerable skill in the conduct of its multi-vectored foreign policy. It has established its security and carved out a growing role in the international arena. If a possible democratic opening arises, perhaps at the time of Nazarbayev’s departure, prior U.S. engagement may yield great dividends. Kazakhstan’s emphasis on relations with Russia and China means it will never be an exclusive strategic partner of the United States, but U.S. interests do not require this. Kazakhstan has proven itself capable of pursu-
ing a balanced foreign policy despite tensions in U.S.-Sino-Russian relations. This serves U.S. interests by reducing the likelihood of domination, by either Russia or China, of Central Asia. Therefore, a productive U.S.-Kazakhstan relationship based on common economic and security interests, as well as a long-term dialogue on democracy, is clearly in the U.S.’s interest.

-Shreya Basu served as lead editor for this article.

NOTES


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