Hoping on Kazakhstan: U.S. Engagement in Central Asia
By Cory Welt, Deputy Director, Russia and Eurasia Program
September 27, 2006

It is not every country that receives the vice president of the United States, the U.S. secretary of state, and two other cabinet members within a span of twelve months. In the last year, however, Kazakhstan has received just this sort of attention. In a visit last October, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice expressed her belief that U.S.-Kazakh relations have “a very bright future ahead.” Vice President Richard Cheney reiterated in May that the U.S. was proud to be Kazakhstan’s “strategic partner” and to “count [it] as a friend.”

Indeed, U.S. policymakers have made Kazakhstan the centerpiece of a new Central Asian policy that envisions tying the region into a “great corridor of reform” stretching southward to Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. During her visit, Secretary of State Rice urged Kazakhstan forward as an “engine for growth” in this “new Silk Road” region and noted that the country could “become the nexus of Eurasia in the 21st century.”

If Kazakhstan is the hope for U.S. engagement in Central Asia, however, it also defines the limits of that engagement. In foreign and domestic policy, Kazakhstan remains very much its own agent. It maintains close ties with its great-power neighbors, Russia and China, and emulates their vision for state development, promising economic growth but leaving little room for clean governance and even less for democratization.

That Kazakhstan has survived and, at least in its urban centers, begun to prosper is a fact that observers can appreciate. In the years following the country’s independence, it was not clear that the Kazakh state-building project would succeed. Kazakhstan was home to nearly as many ethnic Russians as Kazakhs, and the population was spread across a large swath of territory. But a tolerant religious milieu has mostly spared Kazakhstan from the extremist elements that have influenced its neighbors, and a prudent interethnic policy and oil wealth have given the country a considerable boost.

Kazakhstan has also retained a remarkably successful “multi-vectored” foreign policy, establishing close security and economic relations with Russia that it genuinely welcomes, and cultivating productive relations with its leading foreign investor, the United States. Kazakhstan has also established good relations with China and, more recently, Japan. If there is a true face to a “Eurasian” foreign policy, Kazakhstan’s is it.

With its increased wealth, Kazakhstan has even begun to project economic power beyond its borders. Kazakhstan has become the leading investor in neighboring Kyrgyzstan. It has also become a major investor in Georgia, where Kazakh state energy companies established a joint venture this week with the privately-owned Batumi Oil Terminal to facilitate increased flows of Kazakh oil to Georgia’s Black Sea port. This venture is only the latest in a string of Kazakh investments in Georgia, extending beyond energy to include finance and tourism.

Kazakhstan’s westward stretch to the Caucasus signifies a novel rearrangement of resource flows in the former Soviet space. Though the country will continue to send a majority of its westward oil exports through Russian lines, Kazakhstan is now a trans-Caspian player that will be sending increasing flows of oil by tanker across the Caspian to the alternative Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, as well as by rail to the Batumi port.
Discussion now focuses on how to consolidate Kazakhstan’s role as an autonomous supplier of oil and gas to foreign markets. At its most ambitious, this venture will require the construction of oil and gas pipelines across the Caspian Sea. But this is an endeavor that still faces a number of challenges. Investors, including the Kazakhs themselves, must be convinced of the profitability of such routes, while political resistance by Russia (and Iran) needs to be overcome.

Kazakhstan’s importance to U.S. foreign policy in Central Asia extends beyond energy. A willing partner in coalition operations in Iraq and the war on terror, Kazakhstan has become, by process of elimination, the logical partner of choice for the United States in Central Asia. U.S. relations with Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan’s erstwhile competitor for regional influence and a former host to U.S. military forces, plunged after the mass killing of Uzbek civilians in May 2005. Even Kyrgyzstan, which continues to host U.S. forces and recently ousted its own authoritarian and ineffective leader, has proven uninterested in cultivating a close partnership with the United States.

The other two Central Asian states are of specific interest to the United States, but present conditions make them auxiliary to U.S. strategy in the region. Gas-rich Turkmenistan is the second plank of a trans-Caspian energy strategy and was in the spotlight this year for its role in resolving the Russian-Ukrainian gas spat by serving as a provider of cheap gas to Russia. While Turkmenistan increasingly resists this role shoring up Russian energy export profits, its government continues to be the most autocratic and isolationist in the region and is not a viable partner. Tajikistan, thanks to its proximity to Afghanistan, remains an important regional actor, but it is small and impoverished, and continues to embrace Russian military power as a guarantor of internal stability.

Kazakhstan thus holds pride of place in the United States’ Central Asian policy. But this choice also demonstrates the limits of U.S. engagement in Central Asia. Kazakhstan is far from democratic, with heavily restricted political and civil freedoms. It has also suffered a worrisome rise in political violence. In the case of the slaying earlier this year of opposition figure Altynbek Sarсенбайев, a former government official and diplomat, the courts acknowledged that high-ranking government officials had ordered his killing, though many Kazakhs doubted their verdict had reached high enough.

And despite its comparative developmental advantages, Kazakhstan is not necessarily destined to be the engine of change for the “new Silk Road” championed by the State Department. Kazakhstan has never felt itself to be entirely part of Central Asia. Its interest in regional development lies more with Russia, China, and international energy companies than with its southern neighbors. Its relationship with Russia, in particular, is unlikely to be replaced by a novel regional orientation of any sort, whether to the West or to the South.

The new attention that the U.S. government is paying to Kazakhstan testifies to its internal order, economic development, and energy security, in a region whose future has been the source of considerable anxiety to U.S. policymakers. At the same time, Kazakhstan continues to tread an authoritarian path of development that does not complement U.S. interests in the region, and the country shows more signs of wanting to leave Central Asia than to lead it. These two facts must be kept in mind as the United States constructs a closer partnership with Kazakhstan to pursue its wider regional objectives.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) is a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in these publications should be understood to be solely those of the authors.