

The Lasting Repercussions of Kazakhstan's Nuclear Disarmament

Written by Wilder Alejandro Sánchez

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As 2021 draws to a close, the Central Asian states are celebrating three decades of independence from the former Soviet Union. One additional cause worth celebrating is that Central Asia is a nuclear weapons-free region. This development can also be traced back to 1991 as, on 29 August, the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site in the Republic of Kazakhstan was officially closed. Led by President Nursultan Nazarbayev at the time, Kazakhstan is one of the few nations that voluntarily gave up its nuclear arsenal, which makes the country a global trendsetter of disarmament diplomacy and nuclear non-proliferation. While a world without nuclear weapons is difficult to imagine, it is important to continue working towards nuclear disarmament by learning from successful examples.

According to the International Security Research Center's Nuclear Threat Initiative, Kazakhstan had 1,410 nuclear warheads within its territory after the fall of the USSR. Moreover, according to Joseph P. Harahan's *With Courage and Persistence*, the Soviets had installed,

nuclear testing and storage facilities at Kokshetau, a nuclear breeder reactor at Aqtan, several missile tracking and monitoring stations, a nuclear manufacturing complex at Ust-Kamenogorsk, a chemical weapons production plant in Pavlodar, and biological weapons plants and institutes in Stepnogorsk and Almaty.

Upon coming to power, the new government led by Nazarbayev realized that it had to decide what to do with this vast nuclear arsenal and infrastructure. "Within the Kazakh government in 1991, few if any ministers or elected officials knew the full extent of these military-industrial enterprises, military forces, [...] and especially the nuclear weapons and uranium storage areas. Everything had been kept secret," Harahan explains.

Four developments that occurred between 1992–1994 would have lasting repercussions on Kazakhstan, eventually transforming the country into a regional leader with global aspirations and influence. Firstly, Russia's political and economic crises during the Boris Yeltsin years (1991-1999) meant that Russian personnel could not protect or maintain nuclear sites and weapons abroad. "At the Baykonur cosmodrome, launch sites and facilities deteriorated from lack of funds, harsh winter conditions and the absence of skilled technical personnel," Harahan explains. This situation convinced President Nazarbayev that the *status quo* could not continue as Kazakhstan hosted, but not controlled, this unprotected destructive technology.

Secondly, changes in Central Asian geopolitics, with the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, and better relations between Kazakhstan and China. As Harahan explains, "these military and diplomatic developments [diminished] perceptions that Kazakhstan was a weak, vulnerable nation." The START treaty, Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and other similar documents, also gave Kazakhstan a sense of security.

Thirdly, Russian military commanders monitored the aforementioned developments and chose to relocate strategic equipment, like the Tu-95M bombers and missiles out of Kazakhstan and back to Russia. And, Fourthly, closer relations between Kazakhstan and the United States. In mid-December 1991 US Secretary of State James Baker traveled to Almaty, then the country's capital, to meet with President Nazarbayev, to discuss the advantages of denuclearization. Moreover, Harahan explains, "since nuclear non-proliferation lay at the heart of U.S. foreign policy

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objectives, Baker assured Nazarbayev the United States would grant diplomatic recognition and move quickly to have an American ambassador and an embassy staff in place and working in Kazakhstan.”

Kazakhstan transferred its last nuclear warhead to Russia in April 1995. Moreover, the Semipalatinsk test site was dismantled, as well as the other nuclear and biological & chemical weapon production facilities. This was unprecedented cooperation between Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation, and the United States, something almost unthinkable nowadays. Togzhan Kassenova, an expert on nuclear politics and non-proliferation and senior fellow with the Project on International Security, Commerce, and Economic Statecraft at the University at Albany, has written a book (2022) *Atomic Steppe: How Kazakhstan gave up the Bomb* that analyzes and explains the causes and consequences of this historical disarmament.

While not the focus of this analysis, it is important to highlight how over 450 nuclear tests carried out by the Soviet military had tragic consequences on the health of Kazakhstanis at the time, and continue to leave lasting effects today. During a 9 September online event titled “Kazakhstan: How Events 30 Years Ago Spurred Action to Halt Nuclear Testing Worldwide,” organized by the Arms Control Association, Kassenova noted that in 1992, the government passed a law to assist the victims of Soviet nuclear tests. This law is vital for the “recognition of the sacrifice [of Kazakhstanis and also had] legal provisions in terms of who is identified as a victim of the tests and what kind of benefits they could receive.” She highlights how the legacy of the nuclear tests is not an issue that has been fully resolved and “more needs to be done.”

One interesting fact is that the Central Asian Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone (CANWFZ) treaty, established in 2006, was signed in Semipalatinsk. Voluntarily giving up its nuclear arsenal and technology had long-term consequences for Kazakhstan and the greater Central Asia region. As Harahan explains, “Russia’s withdrawal of strategic bombers and rocket forces, its commitments to compensation and its pledge of security guarantees for the territorial integrity of the new nation” strengthened Kazakhstan and allowed it focus away from defense and to develop the country’s oil and gas resources. Nowadays, Kazakhstan is the most developed in the region, a major producer of oil, gas, and uranium; provides military personnel for the UN mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL); and is primed for global investment.

Disarmament also permitted Kazakhstan to develop multi-vector foreign policies to constructively engage with China, Central Asian nations, Europe, and the United States. Harahan adds “President Nazarbayev not only signed and secured ratification of the Non-Proliferation Treaty; he became a leader in the region advocating arms control treaties, weapons agreements, diplomatic alliances and cooperative programs.” For example, Kazakhstan is known for hosting the Astana Peace Process, aimed at peacefully resolving the Syrian conflict.

In mid-November, the Kazakhstani embassy in Seoul, South Korea, and the Library of the First President of Kazakhstan organized a Nuclear-Free World photo exhibition. The exhibition “is dedicated to the 30th anniversary of the Independence of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the closure of the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site.” This exhibition highlights how proud Kazakhstan is of its decision three decades ago, and how it changed the course of not only Kazakhstani but also Central Asian history.

As previously mentioned, Kazakhstani foreign policy has made the promotion of non-proliferation a pillar of its foreign policy. The country has developed close relations with Japan to promote nuclear disarmament. Kazakhstan is also linked to Germany and Sweden as nations that “have made strides toward a common framework on the next steps on nuclear disarmament.”

Emmanuelle Maitre, from the Fondation pour la Recherche Strategique, argues,

Because of its status of [non-nuclear weapon state and] also its close links with [nuclear weapon states], Kazakhstan sees itself as a potential mediator between both groups of states, a ‘bridge-builder,’ able to strike compromises by promoting the importance both of non-proliferation and disarmament.

On 16 December, Kazakhstan will celebrate its 30th independence anniversary, a historical occasion. As for the world, *another* 30th anniversary, namely the closure of the Semipalatinsk test site, must also be remembered.

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Looking to the future, the prospects of nuclear disarmament appear grim, as the countries that still possess nuclear weapons have shown very little interest in eliminating their stockpiles. Thus reduction, rather than total disarmament, is a more logical objective. To achieve this, it will be important that the global community lobby and pressure nuclear states about the importance of the reduction of nuclear arsenals, and it is important for Kazakhstan to continue sharing its own successful post-nuclear record. While the geopolitical situation of Kazakhstan and most nuclear states, particularly the three global powers, is vastly different, there are valuable lessons that can be learned.

The views presented in this article are the author's own.

About the author:

Wilder Alejandro Sánchez is President of Second Floor Strategies, a consulting firm in Washington, D.C. He covers geopolitical, defense, and trade issues in Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Western Hemisphere. He has monitored Moldovan affairs for over a decade: he co-authored a chapter on the Transnistria separatist problem for the book *Separatism and Regionalism in Modern Europe*, while a journal essay on Moldova's Gagauzia region is scheduled to be published this year.