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BALANCING OF SCALES: THE DYNAMICS OF U.S.-KAZAKHSTANI RELATIONS DURING G. BUSH JR. AND B. OBAMA PRESIDENCIES

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Abstract. This article presents a chronological overview of Kazakh-American relation dynamics in the period of G. Bush Jr. and Obama's administrations – periods with principally varying perspectives on the region including Kazakhstan. The authors have aimed at showcasing the change in the priorities of the American foreign policy in relation to Kazakhstan – from a partner in war against terrorism, joint oil projects to the role of a transitional state between the U.S. and Afghanistan. At the same time, it is not appropriate to claim that Kazakhstan was merely participating in bilateral relations. The authors highlight dividends that Kazakhstan received as a result of collaborating with Washington.

Keywords: *USA, Kazakhstan, Bilateral Relations, Oil, Terrorism.*

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ТАРАЗЫЛАРДЫ ТЕҢЕСТІРУ: КІШІ ДЖ.БУШ ЖӘНЕ Б. ОБАМА ПРЕЗИДЕНТТІК КЕЗЕҢІНДЕГІ АМЕРИКА-ҚАЗАҚСТАН ҚАТЫНАСТАРЫНЫҢ ДИНАМИКАСЫ

Андрей Шенин, Айгерим Раимжанова

Аңдатпа. Мақала кіші Дж.Буш және Б.Обама президенттік кезеңіндегі Қазақстан-Америка қатынастарының динамикасына хронологиялық шолу болып табылады. Бұл – аймаққа, оның ішінде Қазақстанмен қарым-қатынасқа түбегейлі әр түрлі көзқарастағы әкімшілік кезеңдері. Авторлар Вашингтонның Астанаға қатысты сыртқы саясаты басымдықтарының терроризммен күрестегі серіктесінен және мұнай жобаларындағы әріптестігінен Ауғанстанға жүк ағыны өтетін транзиттік мемлекетке дейін өзгеруін көрсетуге тырысты. Сонымен бірге, Қазақстан екіжақты қарым-қатынастарда тәуелділік рөлін атқарды деп айтуға болмайды, осыған орай авторлар республикамыздың Вашингтонмен ынтымақтастығынан алған дивидендтерінің дәлелдерін келтіреді.

Түйін сөздер: АҚШ, Қазақстан, екіжақты қатынастар, мұнай, терроризм.

БАЛАНСИРОВКА ВЕСОВ: ДИНАМИКА АМЕРИКАНО-КАЗАХСТАНСКИХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ В ПЕРИОД ПРЕЗИДЕНТСТВА ДЖ. БУША-МЛ. И Б. ОБАМЫ

Андрей Шенин, Айгерим Раимжанова

Аннотация. Данная статья представляет собой хронологический обзор динамики казахстанско-американских отношений в период президентства Дж. Буша-мл и Б. Обамы – периоды администраций с принципиально разными взглядами на регион, в т.ч. и на отношения с Казахстаном. Авторы стремились показать изменение приоритетов внешней политики Вашингтон в отношении Астаны от соратника в борьбе с терроризмом и партнера в нефтяных проектах до транзитного государства, через который идет поток грузов в Афганистан. Одновременно с этим нельзя сказать, что Казахстан играл в двусторонних отношениях роль ведомого, ввиду чего авторы приводят доказательства дивидендов, которые республика получила от сотрудничества с Вашингтоном.

Ключевые слова: США, Казахстан, двусторонние отношения, нефть, терроризм.

Introduction

Bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and the USA were on a steady ground in the beginning of the new millennium – the states did not only demonstrate interest in each other through official communication, but also formed strong ties in the political and economic spheres. In the first half of the 1990s the United States focused on the issues of liquidating Soviet nuclear legacy and organizing American business in the

oil sector of Kazakhstan. Toward the end of the decade, the emphasis shifted to strengthening the role of Kazakhstan in the democratization of the region since this post-Soviet republic was considered by American analysts as the most politically stable in Central Asia. Kazakhstan, in its turn, received numerous dividends from partnership: foreign direct investment from Western corporations contributed to the development of the oil and gas complex, while

the joint cooperation under the Nunn-Lugar program allowed to save significant funds on the elimination of the nuclear infrastructure, and significantly raised the country's prestige as non-proliferation champion on the world arena.

During the visit of the State Secretary M. Albright to Kazakhstan in 2000 the agenda was mainly related to security issues, in particular, the fight against Islamic terrorism. The U.S. focused its attention on this direction long before the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center. Cooperation in the field of anti-terrorism has long been the focal point of bilateral relations.

Literature review

Notably, there are not many extensive studies devoted to a comprehensive study of U.S.-Kazakhstan relations. In 2020, Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of Kazakhstan published E. Tukumov's monograph "Discovering America: A View from Kazakhstan", which is primarily related to the study of U.S. history rather than bilateral relations [1].

The various aspects of American foreign policy in Central Asia, as well as bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and the U.S. have been analyzed under different angles in the works by Kazakhstani authors such as Hisham H., Kydyrbekuly D.B., Tulepbayev P.M., Tulepbergenova G.K., Alimov S.M., Aldubashev Zh. M., Kakenova Z.A. In particular, the following issues are raised in discussion - security, energy, transit potential, war in terrorism in Afghanistan, trade and promotion of democratic initiatives [2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8].

The current article also utilized materials by American, Russian and Kazakhstani think-tanks such as those of National Committee on American Foreign Policy, Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies. Authors such as D. Popov, Y. Troitsky, M. Laumulin, A. Nursha, among others, assess various aspects of bilateral relations and their impact on the region. For instance, in the article "American politics in Central Asia:

approaches of the second administration by G. Bush (2005–2009 гг.) and B. Obama (2009-2010 гг.)" by Troitsky general patterns are revealed, as well as the decision-making process of two administrations – the second one by Bush Jr. and the first by Obama. Meanwhile, Laumulin's article "American politics in Central Asia under Obama's Presidency" offers a general overview of U.S. politics in each Central Asian country individually [9, 10].

Among American authors one should highlight R. Morningstar, F. Starr, A. Cohen and E. Wishnick, whose research are dedicated both the region as a whole, as well as Kazakhstan separately. In Wishnick's "Growing U.S. Security Interests in Central Asia" article a detailed analysis of American interests in the sphere of security is presented, including anti-terrorism and anti-drug wars with support of local actors including Kazakhstan [11]. A comprehensive analytical review of the Obama's Presidency was conducted by F. Starr in a collective work "Looking Forward: Kazakhstan and the United States". A number of interesting insights on the energy policy are included in A. Cohen's "Kazakhstan: The Road to Independence. Energy Policy and the Birth of a Nation" [12, 13].

Apart from research works, official speeches also served as significant sources i.e. official statements by President N. Nazarbayev, G. Bush Jr., B. Obama, State secretary H. Clinton, and the members of Biden's, Cheney's administration. Of particular interest are resolutions of Congress such as "Calling for a free and fair presidential election in the Republic of Kazakhstan", for instance; it significantly varies with the official position of the White House. In addition, the peculiarities of the U.S. foreign policy formation in relation to Kazakhstan and the region generally are revealed in such documents as Cheney's energy strategy titled "Reliable, Affordable, and Environmentally Sound Energy for America's Future" and numerous plans voiced by the U.S. in waging war against terrorism in Afghanistan [14, 15].

The distinction of the presented article by Shenin A. and Raimzhanova A. is in tracing the political aspect of bilateral relations between the U.S. and Kazakhstan during 2000s in a comprehensive and historiographical manner with a focus on numerous legal documents with the aim of supporting further research.

Methodology

To analyze a wide scope of primary and secondary sources, the authors have mainly utilized the historical research method. It implies a chronological analysis of the evolution of bilateral relations in the 2000s, while comparing the intensity of the development of relations between Kazakhstan and the United States with previous periods. Archival documents and official reports of state bodies related to U.S.-Kazakhstan relations in the 2000s constituted the basis for research; these included legal documents, bilateral agreements and memoranda. In addition, the article also contains a wide range of materials from business associations, NGOs, analytical centers, mass media outlets and journal periodicals – both from the U.S. and Kazakhstan.

The presidencies of George W. Bush and B. Obama in the 2001-2016 period was chosen due to the polarity of views of the Republican and Democratic administrations on the policy towards the Central Asian region and Kazakhstan in particular. Nevertheless, it was during these periods that the foundation of modern bilateral relations was formed, even though it has lost some of the stability during Trump's presidency. The analysis of bilateral relations dynamics during 2000-2016 period allows to assess and identify the most effective areas for bilateral cooperation and provide an opportunity for gap analysis.

U.S.-Kazakhstan relations in the beginning of the XXI century

In the period between the visit of M. Albright in 2000 and 9/11 terrorist attacks important administrative changes occurred in the United States – George W. Bush wins the presidential

election. His team, which is associated with conservative and neoconservative ideological camps, three months prior 9/11 presented a new concept of the U.S. energy strategy titled “Reliable, Affordable, and Environmentally Sound Energy for America's Future”, authored by Vice President D. Cheney. The document paid great attention to the issues of transit of Caspian hydrocarbons and the containment of Russian influence in the region. After the terrorist attacks a military-political dimension was added to the American energy interests in Central Asia; this was spurred by the direct presence of American troops in the region [16].

The operation in Afghanistan determined the vector of U.S. military cooperation with the Central Asian republics. Immediately after the events of September 11, the U.S. military began active negotiations on the creation of military bases, the opening of airspace, the construction of logistical points and military-technical cooperation in the region. Kazakhstan strongly condemned the terrorist acts, and, already having strong military contacts with the United States, it was the first to open its airspace for American aviation and the transportation of manpower and cargo to Afghanistan in 2001. In the following years, Astana (now Nur-Sultan)¹ provided its civilian airports for emergency landing and opened additional air corridors on need basis [17].

In addition, the U.S. military had a combat interaction experience with Kazakhstani colleagues, and repeatedly conducted joint trainings such as “Kayak” in 1996-1999, “Zhardem” in 1999, 2002, 2005, and a NATO-standard unit “Kazbat” deployment in Kazakhstan in 2000. Along with these projects the United States has actively and consistently implemented a program of internships and training courses for Kazakhstani military personnel (among other nations) in specialized U.S. institutes, which significantly facilitated the collaboration between countries [18].

¹ For historical accuracy we will preserve the previous name of the capital of Kazakhstan in the framework of this article.

The official support for the “Enduring Freedom” Operation by the Government of Kazakhstan was highly appreciated by the American leadership. In December 2001, during the fifth visit of President Nazarbayev to the U.S. his joint statement with the new U.S. President George W. Bush was published (titled “On new Kazakh-American relations”), and it highlighted the main areas of cooperation between states. This includes fight against terrorism in Afghanistan and cooperation to help the country’s restoration; cooperation on security issues in Central Asia and strengthening border control in Kazakhstan; support for the development of a favorable investment climate in Kazakhstan; American support for Kazakhstan’s WTO accession and the repeal of the Jackson-Vanik amendment; recognition that democracy remains the basis for long-term stability and that the U.S. intends to support Kazakhstan in strengthening democratic processes and institutions, such as independent media, political pluralism, free and fair elections, etc.; and, last but not least, strengthening the bilateral partnership in the energy sector. In relation to the latest point President Bush Jr. stressed that the United States welcomed the opening of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium and deeply supported the development of the Aktau-Baku - Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline that contributed to the diversification of hydrocarbon exports [19].

Moreover, President Nazarbayev has suggested the so-called Houston initiative - the idea for a closer integration of private business sector of two countries and the creation of strong entrepreneurial class in Kazakhstan. On October 2002 the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev has announced the creation of the program aimed at massive support for small to medium-sized enterprises through credits, investments and cooperation systems between large and small enterprises [20]. This program has received large funding from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development [21].

In the 2001-2003 period the development of

bilateral relations went uphill again. Military cooperation stood out especially against this background; it was based on the signing of a bilateral military cooperation plan for a period of five years in 2003. As part of the plan, the United States financed various aspects of military cooperation, delivered Huey-2 helicopters, C-130 transport planes, Hummer cars to Kazakhstan, organized joint military training programs and took part in the large-scale “Steppe Eagle” annual military training exercises [22].

Nevertheless, one should note that despite the positive dynamics of cooperation in the military-political sphere there was a sharp decrease in the economic interdependence of countries, which stimulated Kazakhstan to use a multi-vector economic policy in the region. In particular, in 2003 Kazakhstan has successfully diversified its hydrocarbon supplies through Russian and, most importantly, Chinese directions. The construction of the first section of the Kazakh-Chinese pipeline from Atyrau to Kenkiyak has reduced Astana’s dependence on Western projects across the Caspian Sea. As a result, the government of Kazakhstan has decided to increase state participation in major oil and gas projects through the abolition of privileges and benefits for foreign investors and companies operating in the country. The new laws such as “On Investments” (adopted on January 8, 2003) and “On state regulation of production and turnover of certain types of petroleum products” (adopted on April 7, 2003) introduced elements of protectionism into the activities of foreign companies and provided the state the right to regulate oil exports through the application of excise taxes, customs duties, etc. It is considered that oil corporation in the framework of new and serious pressure from the Kazakh government have responded drastically through “Kazakhgate” corruption scandal (although there is no official support for the direct correlation between these events – authors’ remarks) [23].

It is, hence, not surprising that in such difficult conditions the following 2004 passed

without any breakthroughs in U.S.-Kazakhstan relations, especially given Washington's focus on the elections and the failures of the military campaign in Iraq. Still, during the same year, the visit of the Chairman of the Senate of the Parliament of Kazakhstan N. Abykayev to Washington (May 4-6) and the meeting of the Minister of Foreign Affairs K. Tokayev with Secretary of State K. Powell (June 2) took place. It is also necessary to note the active support of American troops from "Kazbat" in Iraq, where the Kazakh military was primarily engaged in mine clearance, water purification and training of Iraqi cadets in sapper business.

A small number of agreements indicated a sharp decline in the dynamics of bilateral relations in 2004 following an intense start in 2001-2002. The official cooperation included a Memorandum on drug control relations, a small amendment to the bilateral agreements of the U.S. and Kazakh Ministries of Defense on the elimination of nuclear infrastructure, and a general agreement on the development of trade and investment with all Central Asian Republics [24].

The reason for this was not so much the criticism of the government of Kazakhstan regarding human rights violations or active speculation in the West with new data on the hydrocarbon reserves of the Caspian Sea - which turned out to be several times less than previously stated - but rather it was related to the employment of American officials with campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as active political struggles in the Bush administration. While the conservative wing and Vice President D. Cheney expressed their vision in "Reliable, affordable and environmentally friendly energy for the American Future" in 2001, where Kazakhstan was to occupy the central place of an alternative supplier of hydrocarbons and a counterweight that weakens Russia's influence in Central Asia, a different approach was being proposed by a growing group of realists headed by Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice for the told of Kazakhstan in the American foreign policy scheme.

The need for reforms was evident following the obvious miscalculations of the previous strategy—the campaign in Afghanistan threatened to drag on for many years, the reserves in the Caspian Sea turned out to be not as expansive than what was declared, Russia and China increased their influence in the region through the creation of the SCO, and the multi-vector economy of Kazakhstan allowed to diversify the supply of hydrocarbons, thereby depriving the United States of a number of effective levers of influence on Astana. A bit later, following the overthrow of the government in Kyrgyzstan by the opposition, as well as mass riots in the Uzbek Andijan - where Tashkent turned from a reliable American ally into almost a "rogue state" - American politicians discovered that Kazakhstan remained the only reliable "island of stability" for the United States in the region.

In relation to the above, the administration has adopted a new policy for Central Asia, known as the "Greater Central Asia" (BCA). The key idea of the BCA was to create an association of countries as a response to the influence of the SCO, in which the goal would be to create a "safe and prosperous Afghanistan" that would connect Central Asia with South Asia, with Kazakhstan acting as an economic driver for the entire geopolitical region. Otherwise, following the request of the SCO member states to consider the closure of American bases in the region (the Gansi bases in Tajikistan and Manas bases in Kyrgyzstan), the United States risked being left without instruments of influence and, in general, without a presence in Central Asia [25].

Active work within the framework of this new concept was commenced almost immediately after Condoleezza Rice took the post of U.S. Secretary of State on January 26, 2005. American diplomats began to hold regular meetings with representatives of all the Central Asian republics, which in October 2005 culminated in a three-day visit of Rice to the region. During the blitz tour, she visited Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and also paid an

unexpected visit to Russia. The Secretary of State particularly focused on promoting democratic values and fair elections process.

On the eve of the presidential elections in Kazakhstan at the end of 2005, such attention to democracy could be perceived in two ways, especially given the active criticism of the political dynamics in Kazakhstan in previous years. However, unlike her visit in other republics, during her visit to Astana Rice spoke very little about the issues in Kazakhstan and did not organize a separate meeting with opposition representatives, while her predecessor M. Albright did. On the contrary, she stressed that the United States cannot and should not interfere in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. "Each country, taking into account its own characteristics, should choose the forms and methods of conducting democratic reforms," the Secretary of State noted, in fact, expressing support for N. Nazarbayev in the upcoming elections. In addition, she noted the economic success of Kazakhstan, setting the nation-state's "bold economic reforms" i.e. ability to attract investment, creation of jobs and formation of a dynamic banking system to other countries in the region [26].

The U.S. President Bush Jr. spoke in the same vein during the telephone conversation initiated by him with President Nazarbayev at the end of 2005 - "We know that you are very popular. When the people see the results of your work, then, of course, you will enjoy popular support. I would like to note that you have a friend in the United States. We support you and thank you for your work," Bush said [27]. However, it is worth noting here that Senators McCain, Biden, and Graham submitted a resolution to the Congress, in which they criticized the level of political freedom in Kazakhstan and called for fair and open elections [28].

As a result, the elections did not bring any surprises – N. Nazarbayev won the presidential race with a result of 91.15% of the votes. Confident in upcoming victory of the current president, the new U.S. administration has taken a course to strengthen relations with

Kazakhstan through the expansion of economic ties. For instance, due to the sharp price increase in the barrel of oil from 18-25 to 50-60 dollars in the period from 2003 to 2005 the parties were able to return back to discussing the question of Kazakhstan's participation in the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. The latest was opened on May 25, 2005 in Gardabani (Eastern Georgia), where Nazarbayev confirmed Kazakhstan's intention to join the project, noting, however, that the direction to Ceyhan will not be the only one, but one numerous export routes. Still, a year later on June 16, 2006 the President of Kazakhstan officially signed an agreement with the President of Azerbaijan I. Aliyev on pumping 25 million tons of oil along the Baku-Ceyhan route in Almaty.

In the 2005-2006 period a whole flurry of positive comments addressed to Kazakhstan came officially from Washington. In April 2006 at a conference in Kabul (Afghanistan) the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia R. Boucher noted Kazakhstan's regional leadership in economic issues and expressed hope that Kazakhstan will become a key locomotive in the development of infrastructure projects in the region, including Afghanistan [29]. At the same time, the Senate actively thanked Kazakhstan for its assistance in the reconstruction of Iraq and the extension of the service life of the Kazakh unit of the peacekeeping contingent in this Arab country, while the House of Representatives congratulated Kazakhstan on the 15th anniversary of the closure of the Semipalatinsk test site [30]. Simultaneously with this the Congress has considered the updated version of the law on Silk Road Strategy Act of 2006 from the republican Sam Brownback, who suggested to focus regionally on major oil countries Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, even in the framework of existing human rights issues [31].

U.S. Vice President R. Cheney during his visit to the country on May 5-6, 2006 did not skimp on compliments either, although was careful to stress the specific strong points of

Kazakhstani's international affairs – “we are grateful to you for the work you have done in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as for the fact that you are cooperating with us in the global fight against terrorism; Kazakhstan has become a good friend and the key strategic partner of the United States; the whole of America is impressed by the progress that Kazakhstan has made over the past 15 years,” Cheney said. Against the background of Moscow's accusations of weakening democracy and “energy blackmail” Cheney's words further emphasized the U.S. interest in strengthening bilateral relations [32]. During the visit “Houston initiative” plan realization was also signed for the next four years, dedicated to the development of entrepreneurial and investment climate of Kazakhstan (in total 40 million dollars, 24,5 million from the American side and 14,5 from the Kazakhstani side) [33].

Later, however, the journalists of Sunday Times have conducted an independent research and established that the positive tone and the visit of Cheney generally were organized with the help of a famous Washington lobbyist Stephen Payne for a 2 mln dollars service fee [34]. At the very least this demonstrates the great attention to the official positioning of the administration for the establishment of bilateral relations due to following spillover effects and impact on political dynamics. Nevertheless, even without any intermediaries or “gray schemes,” it was clear that in the framework of worsening of relations with Uzbekistan after the Andijan events, Tajikistan's orientation towards Russia, the continuous bargaining over the status of the U.S. military base in Kyrgyzstan, communication issues with Turkmenistan, war in Afghanistan and the political confrontation with Russia, Kazakhstan still remained the most predictable partner from the point of view of resources.

Following this trend, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan K. Tokayev arrived in the United States with an official visit in July of the same year. He was tasked to discuss the conditions for the planned

visit of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, as well as to enlist the support of the United States in the issue of Kazakhstan's chairmanship in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) for 2010. While there were no problems with the first issue and the visit was subsequently scheduled for autumn 2006, the discussion of the OSCE chairmanship once again raised Washington's doubts about the compliance of democracy level in Kazakhstan to OSCE standards. “The promised political reforms have not become a reality, and the situation with respect for human rights in Kazakhstan remains problematic... Successful work within the OSCE could help Kazakhstan's bid for the chairmanship, but so far I can only add to my impression that Kazakhstan, unfortunately, is not ready for the role of chairman,” the influential Congressman K. Smith stated [35].

One of the most important tasks of Tokayev's visit was testing the ground on further cooperation in the New Silk Road project, the reconstruction of Afghanistan, Iraq and the transit of hydrocarbons through the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. As a result of negotiations, the United States and Kazakhstan signed agreements related to the permission for the U.S. to fly 1,300 coalition missions in Afghanistan over the territory of Kazakhstan. In addition, Tokayev expressed support for measures to restore Afghanistan [36]. He also confirmed the commitment to his earlier statements in April 2006 at the conference in Kabul - on the readiness of Kazakhstan to support the Silk Road strategy [37].

Nazarbayev's sixth visit to the United States took place on September 26-29, 2006. In the course of three days he managed to meet with George W. Bush, representatives of the chambers of the U.S. Congress, Energy Minister S. Bodman, Commerce Minister K. Gutierrez, CIA Director M. Hayden, World Bank President P. Wolfowitz, heads of ExxonMobil (R. Tillerson), ConocoPhillips (J. Mulva), Halliburton (D. Lezar) [38]. During the visit the following documents were signed -

a Memorandum of Understanding between the ministries of agriculture of the two countries, an agreement on international air cargo transportation with Federal Express Corporation (including to Afghanistan), a memorandum of cooperation between the Ministry of Transport of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the U.S. Federal Railway Administration, as well as the Kazakh-American joint statement. Nazarbayev has stressed in the follow-up interview that this visit “has brought our cooperation to a new orbit and has become a kind of “breakthrough” in the history of relations between Kazakhstan and the United States”, while the words of the President Bush were indicative in terms of supporting the strategic importance of Kazakhstan as a partner in Central Asia [39].

Despite the very positive end of 2006, 2007 was marked with a certain turbulence in the relations due to the fact that the United States did not have a unified strategy on Kazakhstan. In February the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State R. Boucher flew to Astana on a three-day visit. His goal was to remind the leadership of Kazakhstan that the Bush administration is waiting for concrete steps in the implementation of political reforms, which were actively discussed by the two presidents in September. Significantly, Boucher met not only with the President of Kazakhstan and his senior officials, but also with the leader of the oppositionist United Social Democratic Party Zh. Tuyakbay.

Following the results of the official meetings, mostly only general words were stated about the need to develop bilateral partnership and stimulating democratic reforms, but a few months later, during an interview with Kazakh journalists, Boucher openly approved a number of constitutional amendments proposed by Nazarbayev on May 18, 2007. According to these amendments the power in Kazakhstan was redistributed in favor of the parliament: “These constitutional amendments lead the country in the right direction...and pave the way to a stable democratic system [40]. In a similar vein, at a meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the OSCE member-states in Madrid in November 2007,

Kazakhstan’s candidacy as the chairman of the organization in 2010 was approved [41].

One should note, however, that not everything was positive. It is important to distinguish that the support of Kazakhstan’s role in the OSCE was supported by the U.S. ruling administration but not the Congress, in which Kazakhstan was regarded quite critically and stereotypically. On March 4-7, 2007 in New York a number of high-ranking officials, experts and politicians from Kazakhstan and the United States participated in a special roundtable and formulated problems that needed to be solved in order to coordinate the approaches of the executive and legislative authorities in the United States on cooperation with. It was noted that American congressmen have insufficient knowledge about Central Asia and do not distinguish Kazakhstan from other “stans”. Out of habit the focus is usually on the events in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the discussion of other Central Asian countries becomes secondary. In addition, lawmakers tended to view the trans-Caspian pipeline as vital for European energy security, ignoring the delicate geopolitical complexities facing Kazakhstan. Also, due to the fact that Astana has not managed to fully realize its democratic potential, congressmen questioned the possibility of Kazakhstan’s chairmanship in the OSCE. It was also mentioned that the U.S. Congress unfairly considers it unacceptable to set VAT on equipment purchased under the nuclear disarmament program, even if it is produced in Kazakhstan with a high level of localization. Finally, it was argued that, although the Jackson-Vanik amendment no longer has anything to do with the issues of immigration of Jews from the USSR, nevertheless, Congress was in no hurry to cancel it in relation to Kazakhstan [42].

In the effort to overcome these stereotypes Astana tried to support Western initiatives. For instance, Kazakhstan allocated almost \$3 million to financing social and infrastructural projects in Afghanistan, and as part of the military rapprochement with NATO, included a number of provisions on the transition of some

components of the military defense system to the standards of the alliance in the Military Doctrine of the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2007 (later, however, it turned out to be unsuccessful and was curtailed by 2011) [43]. In addition, the Republic of Kazakhstan has once again demonstrated its commitment to a peaceful foreign policy by joining the 1972 International Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological and Toxin Weapons (BTWC) and taking a neutral position during the Russian-Georgian military conflict in August 2008.

Energy-wise the task of the U.S. administration in Kazakhstan was to monitor the proper shipment of Kazakh oil to tankers for the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. Since Astana regularly fulfilled its obligations, even a serious conflict with oil companies related to the delay in the development of the Kashagan field and the introduction of amendments to the law “On Subsoil and Suboil Use” did not cause serious harm to bilateral relations [44].

It is necessary to reiterate here that the oil and gas sector occupied the most important place in the relations between the United States and Kazakhstan; still, one should not overestimate the strategic importance of Kazakhstan's “black gold” for Washington. Despite large-scale investments in the oil and gas sector of Kazakhstan, TNK projects in the republic are still peripheral and cannot be compared with investments in the Middle East. Moreover, the United States itself consumes no more than 4% of oil from Kazakhstan, while more than 76% is sold to Europe. At the same time, the growing competition from Russia and China, complex geographical conditions and deep oil deposits, limited exports (about 70 million tons), threats of political instability (“color” revolutions), erroneous estimates of the Caspian reserves, as well as new amendments to the laws of the Republic of Kazakhstan regarding the production of hydrocarbons prevented a deeper integration of American oil corporations into the country [45]. From the political standpoint the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline was supposed to be

the most important geopolitical project with the participation of Kazakhstan, but its impact on the energy security of Europe was offset by the construction of new Russian pipelines.

Interestingly, the most active participation in supporting U.S.-Kazakhstani relations in 2008 came from the so-called “Friends of Kazakhstan Caucus” - an association of politicians lobbying for the interests of Astana in the Congress. These interests included the formation of a favorable image of the country that strived to build a market economy and carry out democratic reforms, the repeal of the Jackson-Vanik amendment, and attraction of investment in the oil and gas sector of the country. The latter was highlighted as the most important area of the work of the caucus during the visit of congressmen to Astana on May 24-26. As Nazarbayev stated, “the very fact that there is a group of “friends of Kazakhstan” in the U.S. Congress speaks for itself [...] I am very grateful to you for participating in this group ... we are aware of your constant support for cooperation between Kazakhstan and the United States and always appreciate the advice of our American friends, and highly appreciate our relations” [46].

Nevertheless, the 2008 was marked as a busy year for the U.S. administration – with concerns related to the risk of losing the upcoming presidential elections and, accordingly, the risk of suspension of all current foreign policy initiatives, such as the construction of a missile defense system in Europe, for instance. The only high-level official visit to Astana took place in October of that year, where Secretary of State K. Rice - fearing the growth of Russia's influence after the conflict with Georgia – stated that Kazakhstan is an independent state that is not included in anyone's sphere of influence [47].

Kazakhstan in the context of Obama's administration

Despite the attempts of Bush, Jr. to implement an active, even preventive policy in Central Asia, the American influence in the region was

rapidly diminishing, while the opportunities for Russia and China were expanding, especially in light of large integration projects such as the EurAsEC, BRICS and SCO. Therefore, when the representative of the Democratic Party, Barack Obama, won the presidential election in November 2008, the new administration immediately declared the need to fix the situation and called for a change of priorities in the U.S. foreign policy [48].

The main ideological message of the new vector was the intention to move away from the practice of unilateral actions and forceful interventions to the use of “smart power”. By “smart” the democratic administration meant the restoration of relations with its partners and allies through the entire range of diplomatic tools – from military to cultural. Primarily, this had to do with normalizing the U.S. image in the eyes of the Islamic world, which was publicly declared by Barack Obama publicly on June 4, 2009 during a lecture at Cairo University [49].

The practical dimension of the new policy, which concerned Kazakhstan directly, was the focus of the new administration’s on Afghanistan. Recognizing that the military campaign has been lagging in efforts, and the situation in the country was becoming more dangerous every day, Obama decided to increase the number of military forces – adding 17 thousand people in February, another 4 thousand people in March and 30 thousand people in December 2009 (the total number of American troops reached 98 thousand people during that period) [50]. However, in order to transfer new resources, it was necessary to build a reliable logistics channel and enlist the support of the Central Asian states.

The previous option of delivering goods through Pakistan suffered from regular attacks by Islamists, and in 2008 the Pentagon developed a new route called the “Northern Delivery Network”, which passed through Central Asia. In January-February 2009 the head of the Central Command (CENTCOM), D. Petraeus, toured all five Central Asian republics, following

which Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan agreed to transit non-military cargo through road and railway network, and Turkmenistan opened air corridors for humanitarian supplies to Afghanistan. In March the first batch of cargo for the U.S. army reached Afghanistan through the Latvia-Russia-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan route [51].

The Obama administration has started an active dialogue with Kazakhstan, integrating the already established bilateral cooperation into the implementation of its common Central Asian policy. This was illustrated through active meetings of senior U.S. officials with representatives of Kazakhstan in April 2009. Obama personally met with Chairman of the upper house of the Parliament of Kazakhstan K. K. Tokayev at the “Alliance of Civilizations” Istanbul Forum. In May of that year the Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan Marat Tazhin visited Washington and met with the new U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. The meetings were significant because of a sharp change in rhetoric – the American side significantly softened its tone and stopped criticizing the Central Asian countries for human rights violations. As Deputy Secretary of State W. Burns said: “We will not pretend that we have a monopoly on wisdom, and we will not impose our own system” [52].

As a result of softer rhetoric and absence of harsh actions, the United States managed to set a positive tone in the relationship with all Central Asian republics for the implementation of further initiatives. In November 2010 Astana agreed to the transit of military cargo to Afghanistan and joined the work of the International Security Assistance Force, which was positively regarded in Washington as a departure from a “pro-Russian” policy [53]. At the same time, the United States demonstrated a return to the Clinton administration polemic in the second half of the 1990s, declaring support for a potential pipeline through the Caspian Sea and the expansion of the Tengiz-Novorossiysk route [54]. A year later, the United States also supported Kazakhstan’s application for the construction of an International Nuclear Fuel

Bank, which further strengthened bilateral cooperation on reducing the nuclear threat (the program budget was about \$150 million). [55].

This new concept of the democratic administration demonstrates not just a departure from the power tools utilized by a number of radical Republicans from the previous administration, but also a rejection of the very concept of “Greater Central Asia,” which Obama inherited. Experts outlined that its idea, as well as its implementation, faced a number of difficulties and contradictions, which were formulated by the Kazakhstani expert M. Laumulin. First, he notes, it was obvious to the Obama administration that “the spread of democracy” consists not only in the formal establishment of fair and open elections, but also in the maturation of the necessary socio-economic and cultural conditions. Secondly, when implementing the “Greater Central Asia” concept, the previous administration did not particularly take into account the cultural, social and economic distinctions among countries. Third, in trying to create a geo-economic space controlled by Washington in Eurasia, the U.S. did not coordinate its actions with such players as Russia and China [56].

The actions and attitude of the new U.S. administration was met with a positive response in all Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan. However, in 2011, the implementation of the U.S. foreign policy strategy failed, because, in accordance to earlier promises, Obama announced his intention to completely withdraw American troops from Afghanistan by 2014, despite the fact that there was no drastic change in the situation after a large-scale increase in the contingent in 2009. Instead of a direct military presence, the new concept was to become the “New Silk Road” – the idea outlined by H. Clinton during a speech on July 20, 2011 in Chennai, India [57]. In general, within the framework of the concept, it was proposed to integrate Central and South Asia into a single macroeconomic region with a center in Afghanistan. It is assumed that due to the development of infrastructure, the countries

in the region would be able to enter a new level of development, integrate into the global economy and strengthen the influence of the United States in the region.

Around the same time China has announced its own vision of developing the infrastructure in the region. Its “One Belt – One Road” program is designed to implement projects in four directions: improving regional infrastructure, increasing the level of cooperation between regional economies, reducing trade barriers and encouraging the development of cultural ties for further projects. However, unlike the United States, China is located in close proximity to Central Asia and was ready not only to announce certain projects, but immediately invest billions of dollars in their implementation (\$62 billion from the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China, \$113 billion from the China International Investment Corporation for Property Management (CITIC), \$120 billion of loans from the People’s Bank of China, etc.) [58].

In addition, it was necessary to take into account the expansion of the pro-Russian integration association of the EAEU, whose ultimate goal was to create a kind of analogue of the European Union in the Eurasian space. Thus, Kazakhstan was able to maneuver between three grand projects at once - with the United States, China and Russia, each of which considered the country as the most important transit state. “Kazakhstan should revive its historical role and become the largest business and transit hub of the Central Asian region, a kind of bridge between Europe and Asia,” President Nursultan Nazarbayev stated at the 25th meeting of the Foreign Investors Council in May 2012 [59].

The United States did not deny the serious economic potential of Kazakhstan, and moreover, planned to actively contribute to its development - not through the provision of preferential loans or a special regime for the import of Kazakhstani goods, but through support for Kazakhstan’s accession to the WTO. Through the aid of the U.S. Agency for International

Development (USAID) Washington provided Astana with comprehensive technical and legal assistance on a wide range of issues related to WTO accession – from the organization of customs mechanisms to licensing of intellectual property [60]. After Kazakhstan joined the WTO, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Commerce of the United States Michael Lally noted that Kazakhstani market looks attractive for American companies not only in the oil and gas sector, but also in the telecommunications, insurance and financial spheres [61].

Nevertheless, it can be noted that during Obama's second term the U.S.-Kazakhstan bilateral partnership gave way to major geopolitical concepts and integration projects, in which Astana was considered not just as the most stable and reliable partner, but as one of the key components of the future strategy. The number of mutual presidential visits, of which there was not a single one during the entire second term, speaks quite eloquently about this fact, and the meetings of the two presidents only took place on the sidelines of various summits – G20 meeting in St. Petersburg in 2013, on nuclear security in Seoul in 2012, Hague in 2014 and Washington in 2016, as well as at the 70th anniversary session of the UN General Assembly in 2015.

The information about mutual meetings is rather sparse; for instance, the official press release of the Kazakhstani side about the meeting in 2015 consists of only three sentences [62]. This situation was not unexpected because in addition to the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and the reduction of the physical presence in Central Asia, the United States was completely absorbed in working on two large-scale integration projects i.e. the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, designed to surround China with free trade zones with high environmental and legal barriers to entry. The focus on Central Asian region has seriously decreased, which worried Washington against the background of increasing influence of Russia and China in the region, especially in the framework of the

EAEU and the SCO and large-scale investment projects such as “One Belt, One Road”.

Nevertheless, the United States and Kazakhstan preserved main points of interaction. The key discussion points issues at the meeting of N. Nazarbayev and B. Obama behind the scenes of the UN General Assembly were the mediation opportunities of Astana in relations with Moscow on the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine, the discussion of the economic potential of Kazakhstan after joining the WTO in July 2015, and nuclear safety - taking into account the vast experience of Kazakhstan in the non-proliferation of nuclear materials and the implementation of the nuclear bank project on the territory of the Ulba Metallurgical Plant in Ust-Kamenogorsk.

In continuation of the presidential dialogue in November 2015 the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry visited Kazakhstan as part of touring five Central Asian republics. His visits did not bring new principal agreements, investments or tempting offers, but they indicated the U.S. intention to establish a constructive dialogue with the five states and maintain the necessary levers of influence in Central Asia.

In addition to meetings with the presidents, on November 1 in Samarkand (Uzbekistan) Kerry held a meeting with the foreign ministers of the five republics, proposing a new format of communication, known as “C5+1”. It was assumed that at annual meetings of the heads of foreign ministries, the parties would discuss the entire range of issues related to the region and U.S. interests related to two key issues - trade relations and the containment of China. Kazakhstan, in turn, did not object to the new format, referring to the multi-vector policy, but was waiting for concrete steps from the side of the United States to invest in the Kazakhstani economy. It is no coincidence that President Nazarbayev stressed at a personal meeting with Kerry that “about 500 companies with the participation of American capital operate in our country [...] we are focused on continuing this work” [63].

In addition to the economic bloc, the United States supported Kazakhstan's peacekeeping

efforts to organize negotiations on Syria. Washington welcomed the start of the peace process, however, due to many factors, ranging from the unexpected choice of American citizens in the presidential elections in November 2016 to the unwillingness of a number of participants in the negotiations to see the United States as the main organizer, Washington took the position of an observer and was represented at the talks by Ambassador to Kazakhstan George Kroll.

Nevertheless, the United States noted that the organization of negotiations seriously increased the prestige of Astana both in Washington and on the world stage, and in the U.S. House of Representatives Republican Mark Meadows even made a small speech in which he said that he was “proud of the partnership between the United States and Kazakhstan” and expressed approval of the announced constitutional reforms in Kazakhstan [64]. However, in general, all the activity of lawmakers related to Kazakhstan is limited to these three pillars - aforementioned reforms, congratulations on the 25th anniversary of independence and the change of the ambassador of Kazakhstan to the United States [65]. It seems that the dynamics of Kazakhstan-American relations despite the relatively high level was about to diminish its intensity. The United States officials regularly praised Kazakhstan for its support in Afghanistan and economic development, but preferred not to engage on politically sensitive topics. The bilateral economic relations in the energy sector and loyalty to American geopolitical initiatives in the region were satisfying enough for Washington. And Astana as well.

Conclusion

As a result, it is safe to say that in the 25 years since independence, the partnership between the United States and Kazakhstan has experienced a serious turn from the “creditor-debtor” relationship dynamic, which was formed in the 1990s on the basis of American investments in the oil and gas sector and support for

nuclear disarmament, to the “partner-partner” relationship, where Kazakhstan established stable, equal political and economic ties with major world powers through the implementation of a multi-vector policy. In addition, due to the strengthening of Kazakhstan’s statehood in the 2000s, the United States lost some of the important levers of influence on political and economic decisions in Kazakhstan.

Relations with the United States are still of great importance for Kazakhstan, but they have long been not the only determining direction in its foreign policy. By the end of the 2000s, Astana (now Nur-Sultan) chose a multi-vector approach, and within the framework of this concept, Kazakhstan was able to offer the world not only its energy and raw materials, but also stability in Central Asia, assistance in the process of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and materials, peacekeeping initiatives, as well as constructing attractive conditions for investment.

With the world moving so fast and the international relations changing dynamics as a result of changes in administrations and other world trends it is important to keep a conscious and objective view of any bilateral relationship in historical perspective. Hard-look at what actually happened is different to the interpretations and what-if scenarios. The decade between 2000 and 2010 has in many ways laid the foundation for American politics in Central Asia and the establishment of Kazakhstan as key regional player.

While one can say that what is occurring officially, and is said on the level of official meetings it not sufficient and may be superficial. While this is true as diplomatic meetings and statements do not always represent all inner workings of bilateral relations, they still – always – represent the official stance of the administration and the political support and will for collaboration. This is especially true in case of Washington, which never says things lightly and plans ahead with consideration of involved stakeholders.

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