

GEORGE H.W. BUSH, JAMES BAKER, NURSULTAN NAZARBAYEV, AND AMERICAN RECOGNITION OF KAZAKH INDEPENDENCE AUGUST-DECEMBER 1991

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the study of the process of the emergence of Kazakh-American relations at the initial stage of the formation of the independent Republic of Kazakhstan. The historical stages of building the first international relations of the young sovereign Kazakhstan with the United States are considered: the first visit of the Kazakh delegation headed by Nursultan Nazarbayev to the White House, the first visit of Secretary of State James Baker to Kazakhstan, the first negotiations of the heads of state. Important events in the history of the formation and formation of the independent Republic of Kazakhstan are considered: the December 1986 events in Alma-Ata, the growth of the importance of N. Nazarbayev, attempts to save the USSR from complete collapse, the events of August 19-21, 1991, called the “August putsch”, the turning points of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the confrontation between Boris Yeltsin and Mikhail Gorbachev, the Belavezha Accords and the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the independence of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The article describes the first historical steps of the Republic of Kazakhstan as an independent, peace-loving state: the rejection of nuclear weapons.

Keywords: *George H.W. Bush, James Baker, N. Nazarbayev, independence of Kazakhstan, USA, Russia, USSR*

Introduction

“Mr. President, distinguished members of the Kazakhstan delegation, it’s been a great pleasure to welcome you to the White House on this historic occasion, the first-ever visit of the head of state of an independent Kazakhstan. I have never been to your country, but Secretary Baker has. And he has spoken to me about the tremendous potential of a nation rich in resources, a nation stretching from the Steppes to the Tien Shan in the south, four times the size of Texas. Mr. President, our meeting today marks the beginning of a new relationship, a relationship made possible by the end of the long era of East-West conflict that we called the Cold War. With the passing of that bitter conflict, we enter a new era of hope for a more democratic and free order in Eastern Europe and in Central Asia.

Under your leadership, sir, Kazakhstan is pursuing a course true to these aims. Our meetings today confirm the many interests that we share. The U.S. supports your independence. We believe its security, Kazakhstan’s security, is important for stability in Europe and in Asia. We welcome President Nazarbayev’s commitment that Kazakhstan will join the Non-Proliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear-weapons state and that it will adhere to the START Treaty. We’ll continue to work toward a signing of the new START protocol by Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Byelarus, Russia, and the United States in the very near future. On behalf of all Americans I pledge the support of

the United States as Kazakhstan seeks a future that is peaceful, prosperous, and free.” So said American President George H.W. Bush in the company of his Secretary of State, James Baker, on May 19 1992, at a farewell ceremony at the White House to a Kazakh delegation led by Nursultan Nazarbayev, president of the newly independent Kazakhstan, the largest and most influential of the Central Asian republics which, five months earlier, had been part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. It was a meeting that scarcely could have been imagined the last time Bush, Baker, and Nazarbayev all met face to face, on July 30 the previous year in the Kremlin, with Gorbachev and several other Soviet leaders. Nazarbayev was the leader of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), and a strong supporter of Mikhail Gorbachev’s attempt to preserve the Soviet Union from complete collapse. Bush and Baker shared the same desire of Gorbachev and Nazarbayev, fearing the political and military consequences of a Soviet collapse, and the prospect of dealing with four nuclear powers (Russian, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan) as opposed to one.

At the meeting on July 30 1991, Gorbachev, as was expected, took the lead during the initial sessions, although Nazarbayev made number of contributions, concerning how the Kazakh SSR could develop its considerable agricultural and mineral resources to export abroad, and how it could establish connections with Western oil companies, especially Chevron. The main topic during the Moscow meetings was

economic aid from the West to the USSR, something that the American President and his Secretary of State hoped would shore up Gorbachev's imperiled position at home between nationalists and reformers such as Boris Yeltsin who claimed the General Secretary was not doing enough to liberalize the USSR, and Communist hardliners like Defense Minister Dmitri Yazov and KGB Chief Vladimir Kryuchkov who felt Gorbachev had gone too far already.

In the months follow the meetings on July 30, first the hardliners and then the reformers destroyed any prospect of maintaining the Soviet Union. Bush and Baker moved from attempting to preserve the USSR to preparing for its collapse, while Nazarbayev abandoned Gorbachev, and by extension Kazakhstan's place in the Soviet Union, in favor of positioning himself as leader of an independent Kazakhstan, with American aid to deal with all the political, economic, and social problems a post-Soviet order would entail.

Main part

Despite its position on the periphery of Tsarist and later Soviet rule, the history of Kazakhstan served as a bellwether of the collapse of both systems. The draft riots in Kazakhstan against conscription into labor battalions in the fall of 1916 was a signal of worse to come for the Tsarist order in 1917. The December 1986 nationalist Jeltoqsan demonstrations in Alma-Ata against Gorbachev's appointment of the ethnic Russian GennadiKolbin to head the Kazakh Communist Party revealed how perestroika unleashed forces they could not control. These demonstrations were violently suppressed by Soviet authorities, although the Prime Minister of the Kazakh SSR, NursultanNazarbayev, was rumored to have secretly encouraged them as a way of demonstrating Alma-Ata's growing independence from Moscow. Gorbachev's appointment of Kolbin was intended to demonstrate his intention to exercise direct rule over the various republics, and bypass local elites, whose influence had grown considerably during the Brezhnev era. The open opposition of the Kazakhs to Moscow over this decision, the first large scale resistance to Soviet authority since the early 1930s, meant Kolbin, who possessed little familiarity with Kazakhstan, had little opportunity to serve as Gorbachev's point man in Kazakhstan, and Nazarbayev continued to rise in importance, eventually taking over from Kolbin as First Secretary in June 1989.

By this point, events in Eastern Europe, specifically the dismantling of the Communist order and the reintroduction of multi-party democracy in Hungary

and Poland, indicated Gorbachev's policies were just as likely to lead to the end of the one-party monopoly of power than democratic socialist reforms. By the end of the year, fall of the Berlin Wall, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, and the bloody end to NicolaeCeaurescu's regime in Romania heralded the end of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe. By 1990 the Soviet Union was in danger of collapse, with the Baltic States declaring independence, Georgia and Ukraine leaning in this direction, Armenia and Azerbaijan mired in ugly ethnic conflicts, Yeltsin openly challenging Gorbachev's authority in Russia. Despite his determination to obtain greater autonomy for the Kazakh SSR, Nazarbayev was broadly supportive of glasnost and perestroika, and certainly was not an ally of Yeltsin at this stage, nor a proponent of Kazakh independence. The son of a Kazakh nomad, a member of the Communist Party since 1952 with a genuine proletarian background as a metal worker in Dniprodzerzhynsk in eastern Ukraine, who spoke Russian better than Kazakh, Nazarbayev did not appear to be a man who would lead Kazakhstan out of the USSR. The events of 1991 forced his hand.

This proved to be the case with both Bush and Baker. Somewhat paradoxically, they supported the drive of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania for independence, but hoped to preserve the rest of the Soviet Union under Gorbachev's leadership. The legal justification for this was when the United States legally recognized the Soviet regime in 1933, the Baltic states were not a part of it at that time. The American government never formally recognized the incorporation of the Baltic States by the USSR during the Second World War, and so they were a unique case. The Bush Administration had little problem rollback the effects of 1945, but was not willing to do so with 1917. Yet the events of 1990 and 1991 demonstrated that such as policy was impossible to pursue. By the summer of 1991, it was increasingly obvious that, if the, the USSR was to survive at all, it would be looser confederation of states, as the New Union Treaty of July 1991 guaranteed. Whether this arrangement, which replaced the 1922 Union Treaty which formally established the Soviet Union as centralized one-party dictatorship, could have preserved it in a truncated, federalized form is impossible to know, as events the next month proved to be the death knell of the regime.

The events of August 19-21 1991 were a watershed of the late 20th century. A group of hardliners in the Communist Party, the Soviet government, the KGB and the military, naming themselves the State Emergency Committee, attempted to seize power away from Gorbachev and use to suppress both

nationalist movements in the republics and democracy activists in Russia. The “Gang of Eight”, as they soon became known, attempted to repeat in the USSR what General Jaruzelski had done in Poland ten years before to suppress the Solidarity movement in his country. The putsch turned out to be an amateurish failure, with Gorbachev and his family taken hostage at their holiday home in the Crimea, Boris Yeltsin railed opposition to the conspirators in Moscow, while Bush denounced them in unequivocal language soon after it began. In Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev also threw his support behind both Yeltsin and Gorbachev and attacked the leaders of the State Emergency Committee. By August 21, Gorbachev returned to Moscow and the putsch leaders were under arrest, one of the key figures, Minister of the Interior Boris Pugo, committed suicide. Yet Gorbachev’s reputation was badly damaged, the men who attempted to drag the country back to the Neo-Stalinist era before 1985 were all his appointees.

For the Bush administration, it was also obvious they could no longer deal solely with Gorbachev, whose authority appeared to be rapidly disintegrating. It was past time to establish deeper connections with the various Republic leaders, such as Yeltsin, Ukraine’s Leonid Kuchma, Belarus’ Stanislav Shushkevich, and Nazarbayev. On September 13, following a meeting with the Baltic leaders the day before, US Secretary of State James Baker arrived in Alma-Ata with a meeting with Nazarbayev to discuss the future of Kazakhstan, including, for the first time, the possibility of independence. Baker and Nazarbayev’s families dined together, while the Kazakh leader’s eldest daughter Dariga entertained the Secretary of State while a piano recital. After the families departed, Nazarbayev and Baker had a long conversation about the future of American and Kazakh relations. Certainly, for the first time to a foreign statesman, and perhaps for the first time to anyone outside of his family, Nazarbayev revealed one of his deepest concerns for the future of his country, what relations would be like between the Kazakh and Russian populations in an independent Kazakhstan. Nazarbayev provided a long monologue over the waves of Russian settlers who arrived in Kazakhstan over the previous century, particularly during the early 1930s, the Second World War, and the Virgin Lands campaigns of the late 1950s and early 1960s. By this point, ethnic Russians were the majority in the urban centers of Alma-Ata, Karaganda, and Tselinograd. There was more to the issue than population statistics, as Nazarbayev told Baker: “If you traveled around my country, you would see Russian kids beating up Kazakh kids in the street. That is how it was for me as well. It is not always easy to live with them.”

Nazarbayev informed Baker he felt Kazakhstan, wedged between Russia and China, would need the United States as an ally which could counter-balance them. This was particularly necessary, given the fact many Russian nationalists, including the dissident leader Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, suggested the northern and northwestern parts of the country, as they had a Russian majority, should unite with their “Slavic motherland.” He reluctantly admitted Gorbachev, his former ally, probably had little future after the debacle in August, but also stated he did not trust Yeltsin, or at the very least, did not believe he could restrain ethnic nationalists who aspired to enlarge Russia at the expense of the areas of Kazakhstan where a Russian ethnic majority lived. Following this serious and rather grim conversation, Nazarbayev ironically invited Baker and his staff to join him for a tradition Russian banya, Baker and his personal aide Bob Strauss accepted. Through his interpreter, Nazarbayev went into another long monologue about Kazakh history and traditions. He then took a eucalyptus branch and beat Baker’s back and legs with release his pores and improve therapeutic value of the heat. At this point, Strauss left the banya and jokingly informed his security detail: “Get President Bush on the phone, his Secretary of State is buck naked in a sauna, and he is getting beat up by the President of Kazakhstan.” The meeting ended successfully, and Baker promised Nazarbayev he would speak with soon, reflecting to himself “Is this still the Soviet Union anymore?”

Despite Baker’s concluding statements, there was no immediate plan for his return to Kazakhstan. Events, one again, dictated otherwise. Gorbachev, in a last-ditch attempt to maintain some authority in the country, invited Yeltsin, Shushkevich, Kuchma, and Nazarbayev to meet him in Moscow on December 9. Instead, the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarussian leaders met the previous day at one of former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev’s favorite dachas for his hunting trips in the Belarussian SSR, near Viskuli. The result was the Belavezha Accords, which announced Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine would formally secede from the Soviet Union and form the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Nazarbayev was angered, but not surprised, at the fact Yeltsin did not invite him to the meeting, and for a few days considered leading a Central Asian union to counter-balance the “Slavic Union” formed by the Belavezha Accords. By this point, the Kazakh SSR had changed its name to the Republic of Kazakhstan, with Nazarbayev as its President.

Ultimately, on December 11, 1991 Nazarbayev agreed that Kazakhstan would join the CIS, but

insisted on a meeting in Alma-Ata to discuss how the remaining Soviet republics would enter it. The Summit was scheduled for ten days later, on December 21. President Bush sent Baker to Central Asia once again to as preparation for American recognition of the independence of these former Soviet Republics. He explicitly informed Baker to raise the issue of nuclear non-proliferation as well as American aid with Nazarbayev. After spending much of day at the capital of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan to meet its president AskarAkayev, Baker arrived in Almaty on the evening of December 15 for another meeting with Nazarbayev. After formal greetings at the airport, and a trip to Nazarbayev's home, the Kazakh president once again offered a lengthy monologue about the Belavezha accords, how Kazakhstan would be a bridge between East and West, and could help contain the danger of Islamic fundamentalism. He also discussed how he dealt with Yeltsin's snub of not inviting him to the meeting. He conceded to Baker that, despite his anger at Yeltsin, Gorbachev's hopes of maintain the New Union Treaty was "simply impossible, we are finished with that." The upcoming summit in Alma-Ata would finish the process begun in Belarus the week before. Yeltsin won Nazarbayev's acquiescence to his actions (and by extension Bush and Baker's as well) by promising the Russian Federation would respect the Republic of Kazakhstan's borders as being the same as those of the Kazakh SSR.

Baker made it clear to Nazarbayev if the leader of Kazakhstan hoped for American assistance, Kazakhstan would give up its nuclear arsenal, much like Ukraine and Belarus, leaving only Yeltsin with command of the Soviet Union's former nuclear missile system. Nazarbayev quickly agreed to this, although he informed Baker the disastrous environmental legacy of the dozens of nuclear tests in the Soviet era in the region near Semipalatinsk convinced him Kazakhstan would be a strong supporter of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). He also told Baker he was far not interested with direct financial aid, something which had been so crucial for Gorbachev over the last three years. "Send me advisors and investors, as many

as possible, not money." Baker promised to send members of the State Department's Asian Bureau for Economic Affairs in the new year. He did not finish his meeting with Nazarbayev and return to his hotel room until three in the morning. He departed the next day to discuss the nuclear issue with the leaders of Ukraine and Belarus. Later in the day, on December 16, Kazakhstan declared its independence, almost five years to the day after the Jeltoqsan nationalist demonstrations in 1986. The United States of America was the first country to recognize it. Five days later nearly all the remainder of the former Soviet republics agreed at Alma-Ata to join and the CIS, and on December 25 Gorbachev resigned from his position as Soviet Premier, the final step in the fall of the USSR.

Conclusion

Although both Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin contributed, if indirectly, to the emergence of an independent Kazakh state for the first time since the AlashOrda from 1917-1920, Nazarbayev and Baker, as well as President Bush, were the key instigators of this process, which was ironic given the fact all three attempted to prevent the Soviet breakup until the events of late August 1991 made in inevitable. Like many of the other Soviet republics, Kazakh independence was achieved through negotiations between powerful foreign and domestic political figures, not massive protests on the streets of the cities. Nazarbayev, Bush, and Baker, having concluded the Red Empire was finished, hoped to gain something from the other. For Bush and Baker, they desired a nuclear-free Kazakhstan which would begin to integrate itself with the global capitalist economy. For Nazarbayev, he desired American support against territorial encroachments from Yeltsin's Russia, or possibly oneday China, as well as assistance in economic modernization. Once both sides agreed to this from the period of August to December 1991, American support for Kazakh independence, something that could scarcely be imagined three years or even three months earlier, became a reality.

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