

REMARKS AS PREPARED

**By Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs
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Before the Helsinki Commission**

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“Kazakhstan and the 2010 Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Chairmanship”

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me. I'm pleased to be here today to talk about U.S. policy towards Kazakhstan. I also want to thank the Committee members for their interest and continued engagement and leadership on U.S. policy in Central Asia, including your recent travel to the region. The Helsinki Commission has demonstrated great leadership and bipartisan cooperation in forging a sustained partnership between the United States and the five countries of Central Asia.

There is no doubt that Central Asia is of significant importance to U.S. national interests. Our policy is designed to provide the nations and people of the region with options and opportunity. We support the development of fully sovereign, stable democratic nations, integrated into the world economy and cooperating with one another, the United States, and our partners to advance regional security and stability. We do not view Kazakhstan or any other Central Asian nation as a part of any external state's special sphere of influence, and our relations are not based on competition with any other power. Rather, we seek to maintain mature bilateral relations with each country, based on our foreign policy goals and each country's needs, goals and unique dynamics.

The partnership between the United States and Kazakhstan is a strategic one, with three primary goals. First, we seek to advance democratic and market economic reforms as the best guarantees of their independence and stability. Second, we seek to further our common security interests, by fighting terrorism, stemming narcotics trafficking and promoting non-proliferation efforts. As you know, Kazakhstan was the first country to renounce its nuclear weapons voluntarily after the break-up of the Soviet Union, and has been a strong and reliable partner on non-proliferation. Through the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction program, we have cooperated for over a decade to ensure that Weapons of Mass Destruction-related materials and technical knowledge will not fall into terrorist hands. Third,

we seek to foster the development of Central Asia's very significant energy resources. U.S. companies have recognized Kazakhstan's potential and are cooperating with Kazakhstan to develop its significant oil and gas resources, currently holding major stakes in Kazakhstan's three largest oil and gas projects: Tengiz, Karachaganak, and Kashagan.

Beyond engagement with the United States, Kazakhstan has also made serious efforts to play a helpful role in the international community, and in its region. Today, Kazakhstan is contributing to coalition efforts in Iraq, where it has deployed engineering troops since 2003. Kazakhstan is also taking on reconstruction programs in Afghanistan totaling almost 3 million dollars. And, as you're well aware, after an intense debate within the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe last November, Kazakhstan was selected to be Chairman in Office for 2010 -- the first former-Soviet republic to achieve that goal.

I know that you are most interested in discussing this aspect of our relationship today. Mr. Chairman, the decision to support Kazakhstan's Chairmanship was not one the United States made quickly or easily. While we welcomed Astana's initiative and desire to play a leadership role, we felt Kazakhstan had much to do to meet the high standards of Chairmanship. Political institutions, civil society and the independent media remain underdeveloped; the presidency dominates the political system; and the parliament elected in 2007 has representation from only one political party.

Secretary Rice, former Under Secretary Burns, Ambassador John Ordway, my Deputy Evan Feigenbaum and I all engaged actively with Kazakhstan to come to a decision on our support and what Kazakhstan needed to do to prepare for its leadership role. In recognition of its mixed record on political development, we asked Kazakhstan to delay its Chairmanship from 2009 to 2010 so that it would have time to undertake several democratic reforms. In turn, in Madrid Kazakhstan publicly pledged to pass legislation that would modernize the election law, modernize the media and liberalize the registration of political parties by the end of 2008. It also vowed to support the OSCE's Human Dimension and the autonomy of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

I can assure the Members of this Committee that we are pressing Kazakhstan to meet these commitments fully. Despite slow and uneven progress, President Nazarbayev assured me earlier this year that Kazakhstan will stand by its commitments and he reiterated that commitment before the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in Astana less than a month ago.

With respect to the elections law, the Central Election Commission invited the political parties, including the opposition, to recommend changes in the election law. The Commission is currently hosting experts meetings on the proposed election law amendments, and expects draft legislation to be ready by the end of the year.

With respect to the media law, the government committed to reform the media law in line with recommendations from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Freedom of Media Representative, which include, among others, reducing criminal liability for defamation in the media and liberalizing registration procedures for media outlets. In late February, the Information Ministry formed a working group of government and non-governmental organization representatives to amend the media law. After initial delays, the working group has now begun work on new media legislation.

With respect to the treatment of political parties, opposition parties and non-governmental organizations have put forward several concrete proposals to liberalize the political party law and ease registration requirements for political parties, but the government has not yet engaged with the OSCE on legislation.

In Madrid, Kazakhstan pledged to support and preserve the current mandate of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights within the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, including the integrity of its election monitoring efforts. In Vienna, Kazakhstan has not yet begun to play a proactive role in the Human Dimension Committee but we are encouraging them to do so.

In addition to its Madrid commitments, we are also engaging Kazakhstan on ways to improve respect for religious freedom – an OSCE core commitment. We were pleased that Kazakhstan invited the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights to review draft amendments to their religion law and we hope these recommendations are taken into account in the final version.

Clearly, a great deal of work must be done by the end of 2008. We have enlisted our European partners to help, and we have encouraged direct engagement by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. My Deputy for Central Asia, George Krol, is in Kazakhstan today, encouraging these same steps. Meanwhile, we will continue to regularly encourage the government to take concrete steps toward reform, and through our assistance programs, we will help provide resources to help them promote democratic reform and the development of civil society and independent media.

Our broader vision is for a strong, independent, and democratic Kazakhstan that is a leader and anchor of stability in the region. We believe Kazakhstan's service as Chairman in Office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe will help serve that broader vision. Kazakhstan is an important partner for us, one with whom we are broadening economic cooperation, security cooperation, and diplomatic cooperation. We will continue to expand cooperation on reforms, as well. We hope that together, Congress and the Administration will continue to support any steps Kazakhstan takes to advance democratic and economic reforms as the United States' partnership with Kazakhstan continues to grow and strengthen.

Thank you and I'd be happy to take your questions.

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