Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Sir Alan Duncan speaks at the First President Library in Astana

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[in English]

Good morning, and thank you Timur for that warm welcome. It is a privilege for me to have arrived in Astana yesterday in time to mark the 22nd anniversary of adoption of Kazakhstan's constitution. So I wish you all, one day late, a very happy Constitution Day.

I am particularly delighted to be speaking to you in this impressive library dedicated to President Nazarbayev, who has done so much to shape Kazakhstan since its independence. Indeed, I think I am the first Foreign Minister to speak in this library, so I am honoured.

As I look around, I am stunned by the sight of a gleaming new capital city arising from the eternal steppes. Astana is a truly magnificent achievement, which the nation should be rightly proud of. Everything I have seen so far – from the Baiterek, through to EXPO, through to this magnificent library, shows me a country which has made massive strides since your independence just over a quarter of a century ago.

This year we are also celebrating 25 years of diplomatic relations between Kazakhstan and the United Kingdom. I am pleased to say that today, that relationship has never been stronger. It is a relationship that our leaders have recognised as an important one and so they have strengthened our ties through engagement between our peoples. Indeed David Cameron visited in 2013, the first visit to Kazakhstan by a serving British Prime Minister, and President Nazarbayev, visited the UK just eighteen months ago. I look forward to our two countries continuing to build on that relationship over the next 25 years and beyond that. Indeed, our bilateral relationship stretches from cooperation on the international stage, through to helping Kazakhstan realise its own ambitious programme of reform.

Now, I myself had a fascinating meeting with your Foreign Minister yesterday and I look forward to meeting Prime Minister Sagintayev after this speech. During my meeting with Foreign Minister Abdrakhmanov, we discussed the cooperation between our two countries and I conveyed a clear message and that message was that the UK remains committed to developing this dynamic bilateral relationship, which has already achieved a great deal in the last five years but still has scope for further development.

Now, there is no doubt that the biggest policy issuing focusing minds in the UK is our departure from the European Union. But let me be clear, the UK will continue to engage with the world. As we leave the European Union, we are not leaving Europe. We also want to strengthen our relationships and build stronger partnerships with countries such as Kazakhstan as we look to the future.

So as Kazakhstan and the UK look to the future together, and as the UK looks to develop a new role outside of the EU, both continuity and the future are the themes for my comments. Both Britain's continuing place in the global community, and looking forward with optimism to a future outside of the EU.

Some of you may be familiar with the name Alexander Graham Bell, he was the Scottish inventor who invented the telephone. He once said that when one door closes another one opens. We have a word for that in English – opportunity.

And I think that he was right, not only in saying that when one door closes another opens, but also in his assertion that sometimes we spend so long looking at the door that is closing, we see too late to notice the one that is open.

And so, as the UK prepares to leave the European Union, we may be closing the door on our EU membership, but there will be many, many more doors across the world opening up.

Over the next 18 months, we will negotiate the manner, the nature of our departure from the EU, and we will construct a new relationship with our European neighbours.

Now this will represent a fundamental change in our legal relationship with the European Union, but not to our outward looking view of the world. What you will not see is the UK closing all our doors. We are not leaving Europe and we are not pulling back from the world.

Instead, we will embrace the opportunities that lie before us and build a truly global Britain. One which strengthens our relationships and reaches out to build new partnerships across the world.

International stage

When the British people voted last year to leave the EU, they did not choose to withdraw the UK from the UN Security Council or from NATO. They did not pull the plug on our membership of the G7, the G20 or the Commonwealth. They did not sign away Britain's long-standing and hard-won commitment to the values of freedom, of democracy, and of the rule of law.

So we will continue to work tirelessly with our partners, including Kazakhstan, in international organisations to promote and defend global peace and security, and to protect the rules based international system.

The UK has always been, and will remain, an outward-facing sovereign nation, and, I hope, a force for good, with a diplomatic network that is respected across the world. Looking forward, we will continue to put that network to good use, reaching out to new trading partners and working with our international partners to find solutions to some of the world's most complex challenges. Our commitment to our extensive security cooperation with our allies remains solid.

In this, Kazakhstan is an important partner.

And until the end of next year, Kazakhstan will sit on the United Nations Security Council, as a non-permanent member. I echo the words of your own Foreign Minister, that it was high time that a Central Asian country joined the Council. These two years present Kazakhstan with a unique opportunity to play a major role in tackling the most serious security issues facing the world. It will allow you to bring your unique geographical, historical and cultural perspective to the work of the Council.

Global challenges

Now security is just one of the challenges we face together. There are aspects of this we must consider and we can address these challenges as international partners on the UN Security Council.

Now, consider Syria for instance. The UK condemns the use of chemical weapons, by anyone, anywhere. It is vital that the international community does all it can to rid the world of chemical weapons attacks once and for all.

Also, the UK is the second largest donor country of bilateral humanitarian aid in response to the crisis in Syria, having committed over £2.46 billion to vulnerable and displaced people inside Syria and to refugees in neighbouring countries. We are also leading international support for the Syrian White Helmets, whose volunteers have saved over 95,000 lives.

And then there's Afghanistan – where the UK is committed to creating security and prosperity. In June, the UK announced an increase in its commitment to Afghanistan, with additional troops to support NATO's Train, Advise and Assist Mission in the country. And that uplift will add to the significant contribution of 500 troops the UK already makes to NATO efforts in Afghanistan. We are proud to work in close partnership with the Afghan Government to help it deliver the economic opportunities and security that the Afghan people are looking for and to create an Afghanistan that is less dependent on external support. I know that Kazakhstan is also committed to finding a solution to the ongoing conflict there. I hope that we can work together to help Afghanistan create and shape its own political settlement.

And there's North Korea. It is important to maintain strong international pressure on North Korea, both diplomatically and through sanctions. Their latest missile launch over Japan is a

reckless provocation. So I am pleased that both the UK and Kazakhstan supported Security Council Resolution 2371 earlier this month, which imposed the toughest measures ever adopted by the Security Council on North Korea. The focus of both our countries has to be on ensuring that sanctions are rigorously implemented and enforced by all UN Member States so that they are effective at limiting the regime's ability to pursue its illegal nuclear weapons programme.

The UK will continue to play its part on the world stage to tackle all of these challenges head on.

And it is in that same spirit that we welcome Kazkahstan's vital contribution in developing the Low Enriched Uranium Bank, which was opened this week. It will play an important role in ensuring that there is a safe, secure and assured source of Low Enriched Uranium to generate nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. The Kazakh Government has shown great leadership in taking this important issue forward, and I am pleased that the UK was able to make a financial contribution through the European Union to this project.

Defence / International aid

So, as we look forward towards our future as a force for good outside the EU, we also have the means and the ambition to play a broader positive role in the world.

That is demonstrated in our commitments on defence spending and on international aid. The UK is the only country in the world that meets both its NATO pledge to spend 2% of its GDP on defence, and we also meet the UN target of spending 0.7% of our Gross National Income on development. And these together ensure that we defend our values, work to tackle poverty and conflict, and help to protect the most vulnerable people in our world.

We also remain a passionate advocate for supporting the right and power of women to play a vital role in building a fairer and more just society for future generations. We know that building prosperity for all is vital for long-term stability, and that is why we are working hard to increase women's participation in all areas of life.

Peace is vital to that agenda. That is why I am pleased to say that the UK is sixth largest financial contributor to UN Peacekeeping - some 700 British peacekeepers are deployed in six missions around the world. We support Kazakhstan's commitment to develop its peacekeeping capacity in support of UN operations. We have worked together to sharpen that capacity, through the Steppe Eagle peacekeeping training programme, which is the UK's largest bilateral defence exercise. I eagerly await Kazakhstan's first deployment on UN Peacekeeping Operations.

Valiues

So, the UK is, and will remain, a committed and engaged player on the global stage, championing the values we have always held dear, which are the values of freedom, democracy and the rule of law.

But, the real test of any partnership of equals is a willingness to be honest with each other. I recognise that Kazakhstan has made real progress on implementing human rights protections, in accordance with internationally recognised standards. As you make ever greater strides to secure an even more prosperous, ever more developed future for your nation, it is important to remember that the foundations for this future rest on a society where human rights and the equality of all citizens under the law is guaranteed and enshrined. So we will continue to take forward our dialogue on reform, including freedom of expression and religious choice.

Together we have worked closely on the President's reform programme. One important area of collaboration is judicial reform. In June, the UK Law Society, in partnership with Astana International Financial Centre and the Supreme Court of Kazakhstan, ran a training project to provide Kazakh judges with an understanding of the English common law system and the rule of law.

I was also delighted that we welcomed a high-level delegation from the criminal justice system to the UK, to learn about how our system works. And I am pleased to announce today, UK investment of about US $100,000 for a new project. The NGO, Penal Reform International will work in partnership with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Kazakhstan Government's Anti-Corruption Agency to train prison officers to attain international standards in your prisons, thus contributing to President Nazarbayev's ambitious programme of reforms in the judicial and rule of law sectors.

Trade

The UK has a proud history as a trading nation, and we have long been one of the strongest advocates of free trade. Kazakhstan will continue to remain a key partner for the UK. We are currently the sixth largest investor here. Since Kazakhstan's independence in 1991, we have invested more than £20bn. Once we leave the EU we will look to remove barriers to trade, and so ensure continuity in our trade and investment relationships.

Kazakhstan remains an attractive market for UK companies. There are now over 500 British companies registered here. Many are active in the oil and gas and mining sectors. But there is also increasing collaboration between the new Astana International Financial Centre (AIFC) and the City of London. The Lord Mayor of London's visit in July highlighted our close cooperation in developing the Centre and I welcome Kazkahstan's decision to use English Common Law as the basis for the Financial Centre including its Court of Arbitration.

I am also delighted that we are taking part in EXPO 2017. It is an excellent opportunity for the UK to show that it is open for business. I had a fantastic time when I visited yesterday. And whilst, as a British Minister, I am obliged to say that the UK pavilion was of course the best at EXPO, I was amazed and impressed by the scale and imagination of the Kazakh pavilion – which truly captured both the history and culture of Kazakhstan and at the same time, your collective vision for the future.

EXPO shows too that Kazakhstan is taking its place in the world, with115 countries and 22 international organisations taking part. I hope that EXPO will open new doors and new opportunities for Kazakhstan - such as modern trading routes along the old Silk Road.

As this takes shape there will be considerable opportunity for cooperation between the UK, China and Kazakhstan. Our Embassy here in Astana is working closely with the Kazakhstan Ministry of Investment and Development to identify potential joint projects that would be delivered here. We hope to hold an event soon with participants from all three countries, aimed at identifying a new consortium to deliver the first belt and road project in Kazakhstan

So to end where I started: the UK is not looking, in mood of regret, on closed doors. To quote the famous US astronaut, Buzz Aldrin, a man who inspired generations, including possibly our own British astronaut, Tim Peake, “There are always door openings. And gradually, the opportunities open up in front of you.”

We will always be a committed and engaged player in the global community, and we look forward, optimistically, to the opportunities brought by our exit from the EU. I personally look forward to building further on the UK’s relationship with Kazakhstan as we open new doors and build a prosperous future together.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/sir-alan-duncan-speaks-at-the-first-president-library-in-astana