«The new concept of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy openly declares its intentions to secure the status of a “leading state in the region” – states Andrey Chebotaryov, director of “Alternative” research center, in an article written specifically for CABAR.asia.

On March 6, 2020, a presidential decree has approved the Republic of Kazakhstan’s Foreign Policy Concept for 2020-2030. This document represents a system of fundamental views, i.e. the principles, goals, objectives, priorities, and mechanisms of the country’s foreign policy during the reference period.

**Significance of the concept**

The significance of adopting the document should be due to several factors. First, the power transit in Kazakhstan in March 2019 has caused a great resonance among official circles and business communities in neighboring and other countries. Republic’s leading foreign counterparts have understandably expressed their concerns about the new president’s efforts to preserve the foreign policy of his predecessor and country’s commitment to them, as reflected in the relevant treaties and agreements[1].

Keenly aware of expectations, Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev from the very beginning of his political career as Kazakh president clearly outlined the continuity in exercising the country’s endorsed political course, the foundations of which were laid by country’s first president Nursultan Nazarbayev. In this regard, among measures to implement the main provisions of his election program was the adoption of a new Foreign Policy Concept aimed at pursuing a multi-vector and well-balanced foreign policy[2]. The subsequent implementation facilitates the preservation and further development of the positive developments in relations between Kazakhstan and leading foreign policy counterparts.

Besides, Tokayev gives high priority to foreign policy as a career diplomat. The concept has suggestively become the first document of the appropriate level to be approved during his time as head of state. All the more so since the official term of the previous concept, designed for 2014-2020, just ended this year.
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Another significant aspect is that this makes a second official foreign policy document to be shared with the general public, accessible through publications on the websites of the President and Kazakhstan’s Foreign Ministry. Kazakhstan’s foreign policy concept, until 2014, was purely internal for unknown reasons. The foreign policy’s outline used to be identified primarily from the president’s annual messages to the people and his appearances before the foreign diplomats.

**Old and new principles and approaches**

The primary difference between old and new concepts is in an analysis of the current situation in the international system. The emphasis is put on identifying challenges and threats to the system, such as a crisis of confidence and amplified conflict between various international actors, including sanctions, erosion of the international law principles, increased extremism, terrorism, and the arms race, the intensification of hybrid, cyber, trade and currency wars, among others.

Kazakhstan, on the one hand, makes it clear that it keeps abreast, keenly aware of and bears in mind the ongoing processes of regional and world politics. On the other hand, in an ambiguous environment of the international arena, Kazakhstan finds it imperative and advantageous to position itself as an “active and responsible international community participant and contributor to ensuring international and regional stability and security”[3]. The latter is focused on maintaining friendly, predictable and mutually beneficial relations with foreign partners.

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Thus, despite the power transit, the country is interested to remain distant and neutral in contradictions and conflicts of world powers. Therefore, a multivector and pragmatic foreign policy allows Kazakhstan to build relations with other countries and international organizations per its interests and on an equal and constructive basis.

At the same time, the concept is supplemented by new principles of the country’s foreign policy, including helping build stable, fair and democratic world order, promoting the state’s external openness and the inextricable link between security and development in international relations. Some of the former principles have gained an extended interpretation. In particular, the equality of all states in the world is presented as equitable
integration into the global political, economic and humanitarian arena. A collective address to international challenges and conflicts is viewed as multilateralism, “aimed at establishing a collective vision and effective approaches for the international community to address a wide range of global and regional issues based on multilateral advisory and agreements”[4].

Noteworthy is the rather visible reflection of the human factor in the new document that now is not only a state-oriented but also adapted to society and individual citizens. This approach is based on the concept of the “Hearing State”[5] proposed by Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev in his first Message to the people of Kazakhstan. It refers to creating a qualitatively new mechanism for ensuring a continuous dialogue between state and society, whereas the former gives a prompt and effective response to the needs of citizens.

On September 2, 2019, Kassym-Zhomart Tokaev, for the first time as President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, delivered a Message to the people of Kazakhstan, in which he outlined key issues of domestic policy, including the concept of “Hearing State”. Photo: zakon.kz

In the foreign policy context, this is expressed in raising the practical interests of Kazakh citizens and national business to the core of the policy. It is significant in this regard that the protection of the rights, freedoms and legitimate interests of Kazakh citizens and ethnic Kazakh compatriots living abroad was reflected not only in the goals and objectives but also in the basic principles of the country’s foreign policy. This category also includes Kazakhstani children adopted by foreigners. The concept also provides for the establishment
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of effective communication with general Kazakhstani public on foreign policy issues, a systematic clarification of the relevant tasks and priorities, and the use of “public diplomacy” tools.

The economic dimension of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy has seen a simultaneous proliferation. The number of its constituent priorities, compared to the previous concept, increased from 9 to 14. First, Kazakhstan’s investment cooperation with foreign partners is concretized through listing the economy sectors requiring foreign investment. These are mechanical engineering, appliance industry, agriculture, light manufacturing, healthcare, education, transport, tourism, etc. Thus, the activities of Kazakhstani diplomats are focused on promoting the non-raw-materials sectors of the country’s economy.

Besides, the concept is designed to promote the development of Kazakhstan’s transit and logistics potential, including the introduction of an “open skies” regime, the expansion of the range, volume and geographical destinations of national exports, dismantling various export barriers in foreign markets, as well as the promotion of institutions like the Astana International Financial Center, The Khorgos International Center for Cross-Border Cooperation and created jointly with Uzbekistan the “Central Asia” Center for Trade and Economic Cooperation.

However, the final version of the document in question did not include a concept like “soft power”, which could have brought a new meaning into the economic and humanitarian dimension of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy. The domestic “soft power” was assumed to be based on certain values as social stability, interethnic and interfaith harmony, ease of doing business, innovative education, among others[6].

According to the head of the Synergy Analytical Center under Almaty Management University’s School of Law and Public Policy Rustem Kurmanguzhin, Kazakhstan must and can form and use its own “soft power”. And not only to promote a positive image of the country in the international arena but also to confront the ongoing informational influence from the outside. The expert also suggests projecting the Kazakh “soft power” on other countries and even on the entire world community using the achievements of the country’s independent development, previously intended for addressing internal challenges[7]. It seems that these recommendations would be applied to one degree or another in Kazakhstan’s international cooperation in the field of culture, education, science, tourism, and sports.

Updated Priorities
The new concept indicates a major change in Kazakhstan’s foreign policy priorities. This perspective applies particularly to the country’s positioning in a regional context. If in the previous concept, Kazakhstan presented itself as a country that recognizes its role and responsibility and strives for the development of intra-regional integration in Central Asia, now it openly declares its intentions to consolidate its status as a “leading state in the region”[8]. Hence, the consolidation of leading positions and the promotion of long-term interests in Central Asia ranks second among Kazakhstan’s strategic goals in the field of foreign policy.

To achieve this objective Kazakhstan, firstly, regards relations with other countries in the region having a strategic nature, bringing them to the same level as geopolitical actors such as China, Russia, the United States, and the European Union. Secondly, the country supports the expansion of multilateral dialogue and cooperation in Central Asia. Lastly, Kazakhstan stands ready to help strengthen the existing interaction formats between the Central Asian countries and foreign partners.
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For all this, Kazakhstan, among other things, is interested in using the regional hub of international organizations – part of the UN – that has opened in Almaty in 2018. It is about giving this hub the status of the UN interregional center in Kazakhstan for the Sustainable Development Goals and promoting its activities in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Other Central Asian states are yet to react to the changes in the positioning and goals of Kazakhstan.

Generally speaking, Kazakhstan’s foreign policy priorities are shifted from individual countries to regional and multilateral cooperation. Only neighboring countries, the USA and the EU are separately identified in a bilateral context. In Asia, for instance, the emphasis is placed both on active participation in the work of the SCO, the Council of Interior Ministers, the OIC, the Cooperation Council of Turkic-speaking states, and on expanding ties with ASEAN, the League of the Arab States and other international organizations, where Kazakhstan is involved.

The new concept indicates separate priorities considering the changes in the international arena that have occurred to date. For instance, enhanced cooperation in the Caspian region in the field of energy, transport, environmental protection and security following adopted in the 2018 Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea. The concept also expresses an intention to continue close cooperation with the EAEU member state and to optimize negotiation approaches within the framework of the Union. As for the development of relations with the “leading states of Europe outside the EU”, there is a foremost focus on Great Britain, which completed its exit from the European Union (Brexit) last year.

**Conclusion**

The new concept of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy, on the one hand, reflects changes in the country’s political life followed by the power transit. Hence the above innovations, including claims to regional leadership in Central Asia. On the other hand, the concept points out the continuity of Nursultan Nazarbayev’s multi-vector and pragmatic foreign policy.

Kazakhstan’s relations with foreign countries and international bodies have recurrently demonstrated, however, that multivector foreign policy based on various principles is not necessarily a guarantee of relations developing exclusively in a constructive manner. An illustration is Kyrgyzstan’s frequent complaints against the Kazakh side regarding restrictions on the movement of Kyrgyz goods that transit through Kazakhstan to third countries. Kazakhstan, in turn, often makes claims to Russia because of barriers to the
Considering everything that has been happening in the world, starting with conflicts between leading geopolitical actors and ending with the consequences of the global spread of the coronavirus infection COVID-19, most countries of the world have three following options to choose from. They either have to adopt clear guidelines in favor of a particular superpower or strongly isolate themselves from external influence or continually show flexibility in relations with different countries.

Kazakhstan due to various factors manages to stay in the third group of countries. The concept, thus, not only embodies a guide to action for the country but also sends a clear signal to foreign counterparts on the limits of permissible in relations with Kazakhstan. The implementation of the document and all its constituent parts will largely depend on the competencies of the head of state, diplomats and republic’s other officials engaged in international cooperation.

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[2] Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated June 19, 2019 No. 27 “On measures to implement the election program of the President “Welfare for all! Continuity. Justice. Progress” and proposals received during the nationwide “Birge” campaign // A Legal
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Information Database Әділет” (http://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/U190000027U)


[4] Ibid.


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