

A study in nuclear contrast - Pyongyang, North Korea seeks an atomic bomb while Astana, Kazakhstan leads in nonproliferation

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A study in contrast: North Korea is killing itself to get an atomic bomb; Kazakhstan is rich because it gave its nukes away.

Pyongyang rattled the world on Sept. 9 with its fifth nuclear in bomb test, and a few days later Astana, Kazakhstan got bouquets from lawmakers in Washington marking the 25th anniversary of that nation shutting down its mega-toxic atomic bomb test site.

Twenty years after giving its nuclear-tipped missiles back to Mother Russia and giving its “wealth” of lethal plutonium to Uncle Sam for safekeeping, Kazakhstan is the richest nation in Central Asia, whereas the gulag state of North Korea is a hell hole of famine and fear.

The anti-nuclear movement in the Soviet Union actually began in Kazakhstan in 1989. In that year, the Soviet Union was on a fast track to oblivion, but to hundreds of blue-jean clad activists in Kazakhstan’s capital of Almaty, it couldn’t get there fast enough. Young professionals looking for a break from the Soviet past were among thousands taking advantage of Mikhail Gorbachev’s Glasnost era, which allowed for public dissent from Soviet policies.

By 1989 the citizens of this northernmost nation of Central Asia were hearing for the first time that hundreds of birth defects were being linked to the radiation contamination of 456 nuclear explosions in the Semipalatinsk region. Of these 116 were conducted in the open air, with radiation and fallout spread throughout a wide region.

The movement influenced the authorities to stop the testing in 1989 and two years later the Semipalatinsk testing site, a vast region the size of Belgium, was closed.

After gaining independence in December 1991, Kazakhstan under the leadership of its former communist party boss, Nursultan Nazarbayev, had to decide what to do with the test site and more than 1,000 nuclear weapons. At the time, Kazakhstan’s vast petroleum deposits lay hidden, and the nation was a poor country, save for its huge nuclear arsenal, which could have made it a threat to the super powers. But Nazarbayev decided not to play the nuclear shakedown card.

Arms controllers were stunned in 1995 when the nation became the first former Soviet state to give its nuclear forces — intercontinental-range ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads — to Russia. In 1994

more than 500 kilograms of sensitive nuclear material was sent to the United States, where it was later blended down to nuclear fuel for reactors that generate nuclear power.

Twenty-five years later, U.S. lawmakers lauded Kazakhstan on Sept. 13 for its leadership in nonproliferation.

“North Korea’s fifth test of nuclear weapons shows how vital it is for the United States to strengthen the global norm among the remaining nuclear powers so that we not have nuclear testing that sets a bad example for the rest of the world,” said Sen. Ed Markey, Massachusetts Democrat at a Capitol Hill gathering. He praised Kazakhstan for “phenomenal leadership” in renouncing nuclear weapons immediately after gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. He was joined in his support in his laudatory remarks by Rep. Bill Foster, Illinois Democrat, a former nuclear physicist.

But not only is this vast northern-steppe nation healthier because of its decision to close the test site, it is wealthier, too, according to William H. Courtney, an adjunct fellow with the RAND Corporation and a former U.S. ambassador to Kazakhstan, who cited three important payouts.

“First, Kazakhstan’s nonnuclear posture helped it forge close ties with the West. In turn the West gave early and strong support to investment that has helped Kazakhstan unlock greater value from its abundant energy resources. As a result, Kazakhstan is now one of the world’s larger oil exporters.

“Second, wide support in Kazakhstan for nonproliferation stance reinforces investor perceptions that the country is stable and pragmatic. This has helped it attract substantial investment, including the \$37 billion Chevron Tengiz oil field development, the first huge foreign investment project anywhere in the former Soviet Union.

“Third, the prominent place of nonproliferation in foreign policy has helped Kazakhstan gain respect and stature to be a leader on the international stage,” Mr. Courtney said.

Kazakhstan has been called the rising star of Central Asia not only because its citizens have the region’s highest per capita income and a growing economy, but because of its steady rise in diplomatic leadership.

In 2009, Kazakhstan and four neighbors created the Central Asian Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone.

In 2010, Kazakhstan became the first former Soviet state and first predominantly Muslim country to chair the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian state to have chaired the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, in 2011-2012.

Such efforts played a role in the election of Kazakhstan to take over the non-permanent seat at the U.N. Security Council in January 2017. Without a doubt, nonproliferation will rank among its highest priorities.

Nations define themselves not only by what they strain to pull down, but by what they choose to give up. Governments and investors around the world have learned to fear North Korea; they have learned to trust Kazakhstan.

Douglas Burton is a former U.S. State Department official in Kirkuk, Iraq and the North American finalist in Kazakhstan’s third annual Foreign Media Contest.