

Kazakhstan economy benefits all citizens

Did you ever dream you were somewhere on the other side of the world, then wake up to find it was true?

Me neither. That is, until this morning, when I woke up in Kazakhstan.

I'm typing this from my hotel room in Aktobe, a town the size of Colorado Springs about 30 miles from the Russian border. My team is charged with reviewing the curriculum of Kazakhstan's Air Defense Forces Institute, the Kazakhstani equivalent of the Air Force Academy.

All of us are USAFA faculty, chosen for our areas of interest and expertise.

The original memo that put the team together mentioned three conditions for an ideal volunteer: 1) currently on faculty at USAFA, 2) a Ph.D. in science or engineering, and 3) a Russian speaker. There is, as far as I know, exactly one such individual on planet Earth. Good thing he volunteered.

Can you point out Kazakhstan on a map? Eight weeks ago, I couldn't. It's actually the ninth-largest country in the world. It broke away from the Soviet Union in 1991 and has never looked back.

Most flights bring you in to Astana, the new capital.

Fighting desperately to stave off fatigue, I went outside for a walk. In my sleep-deprived stupor, I thought I had wandered back across the ocean. How else could I explain my presence in an open-air mall framed by the White House, both houses of Congress and the Supreme Court?

Turns out it was designed that way, and while the big blue dome of the Presidential Palace should've told me that I wasn't in D.C., the similarity was nonetheless very flattering. After all, President Nazarbayev didn't have to pattern his capital after ours. He just wanted to.

But even the simple pleasures of solo sightseeing aren't realistic unless you know the language. Americans have been blessed through accidents of history and geography to not need familiarity with languages other than their native tongue. Our interpreter told me that professional translators routinely describe people like me as "remarkable Americans." We stand out because we're so unusual.



OPINION

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Contributing columnist

Everyone in Kazakhstan is bilingual. Now that Kazakhstani schoolchildren start English in the first grade, you might as well change the "bi" to "tri."

"Boom town" is too small a phrase to describe the cities I saw. I think if there were such a phrase as "boom country" Kazakhstan would be it. Buildings are going up everywhere: office complexes, apartments and shopping centers. This is a country that has survived Mongol invasions, two centuries of Tsarist domination, and 75 years of

communism to (eventually) an enthusiastic embrace of private property, entrepreneurship and capitalism.

Yes, this means inequality. Some people are very rich, most are not. But the ones who are not, like our driver, would never turn back the clock. He came to Astana from the provinces because he could get better work in the capital, and now aspires to the same things all of us aspire to: A better quality of life.

An Air Force major I chatted with in Aktobe couldn't say enough about his pride in his country and his optimism for the future. And why not? He's got computer skills, and can now program in C++. He loves the military, but when his contract is up he can either stay in or get a job in Kazakhstan's booming technology industry. He's got options he could never dream of before the fall of the Soviet Empire.

My deadline is here, though our trip is far from over.

I don't yet know how successful our official visit will be. But based on what we've done so far, I'm feeling very confident. In our first meeting with Kazakhstan Air Force faculty, we've learned that teachers everywhere face the same issues, soldiers everywhere face the same issues, and people everywhere face the same issues. It's all just the same on the other side of the world.

(The views expressed in this column are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Air Force, the Department of Defense or the U.S. government.)

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