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The Quest for Reputational Security: the Soft Power Agenda of Kazakhstan ^[1]

One of the problems for soft power as a concept is that it is overly identified with the countries at the top of the heap: the U.S., France, Germany, Britain and so forth. Media coverage of the *Soft Power 30*  report, as with other measures of international reputation like the *Anholt GfK Nation Brands Index*, focuses on the highest places rather than the underlying trends. These measures by their own admission limit themselves to the most visible countries in international space. In an era of renewed international rivalry and volatility, our understanding of the picture must change. Newer or weaker countries (or those actively engaged in disputes) are not simply seeking to build their soft power as a luxury add-on to boost exports, tourism or foreign direct investment. They need soft power for the same reason they need the hard power assets of a standing military: core security. Such vulnerable nations are seeking to develop reputational security.

I would define reputational security as the degree of safety accruing to a nation state that

proceeds from being known by citizens of other nations. While it often helps most to be known for something positive, simply being known is of some benefit. A country with reputational security is accepted as legitimately sovereign over its territory, not just in law but also in international public perception. It is appreciated as a member of the international community and seen as an integral part of the fabric of that community. People are interested in news from the place and should it be threatened, they see its preservation as a foreign policy priority. Reputational security (like any form of security or the entire category of soft power) is hard to measure, but there are good historical cases of its cultivation. One way to read Britain's cultivation of American public opinion at the outset of World War II, is to see a growth in reputational security as the U.S. public came to see the preservation of Britain as a greater priority than remaining strictly neutral in the war.

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It is sometimes easiest to identify a dimension of international society by its absence. This is certainly the case with reputational security. Ukraine had military and trading partners as of 2014 but certainly did not have reputational security. The thing that the country was best known for—having been part of the Soviet Union and maintaining a complex set of interconnections to Russia—did not help when the Ukraine crisis struck. Rather, the public's knowledge of Ukraine's former connection to the USSR made the Kremlin's narratives about loyal separatists looking to reconnect to the old motherland seem plausible. Ukraine was not seen as contributing anything important as a singular and unified entity that would be lost if a neighbor's military intervention chipped away at a province or two. It did not help that a wave of disinformation and uncertainty confused the picture for the international public, but sympathy for Ukraine and its plight was plainly much more limited than, say, international concern for the integrity of Poland during the martial law crisis back in 1981–83.

It is possible to see countries actively seeking to develop reputational security. The intense work of Kosovo's formal diplomats to get recognition for their country has been matched by work to place the country on the mental map of Europe through its award-winning Saatchi & Saatchi "Young Europeans" branding campaign and contributions to international cultural events like the Biennale of Art and Architecture in Venice. For Taiwan, survival hinges on the polity's ability to maintain an international perception of its identity as something distinct from mainland China, whose survival in some unique form is of value to the wider world. The most obvious strategy of reputational survival is perhaps that of the government of Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan.

Since independence on the breakup of the USSR in 1991, President Nazarbayev has pursued a range of strategies that have not merely sought to develop his country's economy, but to build its relevance and reputation among global audiences. In the first instance there has been a symbolic diplomacy of place and space. Nazarbayev moved the capital from Almaty to Akmola, renaming the city Astana (the Kazakh term for capital) in 1998. The government set about building a planned city of towers and memorials in much the same way as the place-

builders of the past who created Washington, D.C., Canberra, Brasília and other "concept" capitals. The overall design was that of Japan's Kisho Kurokawa and some of the world's leading architects contributed buildings, especially Foster + Partners. The city was recognized by UNESCO as a city of peace in 1998.

Kazakhstan has also been a great joiner. In 1996 Kazakhstan was a founder member of the Shanghai Five group (which brought together China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) and became a driver of its successor, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) launched in 2001; Kazakhstan hosted summits in 2005, 2011 and 2017. Kazakhstan is an active member of the post-Soviet structures: the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), but was in 1992 the initial proposer of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). The organization convened in 1999 and now includes 26 member states.

Along similar lines, in 2003, Kazakhstan launched the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, which brings global religious leaders together on a triennial cycle in Astana. The underlying idea is to combat extremism through inter-faith dialogue and share the ethic of tolerance which Kazakhstan claims a national characteristic. This was framed as a major contribution to one of the most significant problems facing the world, and so central to the President's agenda that a small memorial for the first meeting was added to the chamber at the national memorial "Baiterek" tower in the center of Astana. The second meeting in 2006 had its own spectacular building, a 77-meter glass pyramid—the Palace of Peace and Accord—created by Foster + Partners. A third meeting took place in October 2018.

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Kazakh educational policy has been similarly oriented to building an international reputation and preparing citizens for global engagement. The country has an extensive system of sending students overseas for higher degrees, and is also seeking a place in a global academic conversation. The key moment was the founding of Nazarbayev University in Astana in 2010 with English as its medium of instruction. The government has required all post-elementary STEM education to be delivered in English, and plans to introduce Roman letters as the script of the country in place of Cyrillic by 2025. The model is Singapore rather than Dubai. There is no thought of bringing internationally operated campuses to Kazakhstan.

Some of the country's cultural diplomacy events have seemed as oriented toward pleasing a domestic audience as building an international reputation, but governments also require a degree of reputational security among their own citizens. The range of film festivals which have been tried, such as the Eurasia International Film Festival, which launched 1998; "Shaken's Stars" International Film Festival (aimed at young filmmakers), which began in 2003; the International Astana Action Film Festival (the only one dedicated to the action film genre), which ran from 2010-2012; and the Almaty Indie Film Festival, which began in 2017. Such events have even drawn visits from Western film stars. An image of Nicolas Cage as a Eurasia Festival guest looking dazed in Kazakh costume was a brief Internet meme in the summer of 2017. Yet they also reflect an attempt to build Kazakhstan into an international media conversation.

The desire to develop its reputation certainly underpinned the interest of Kazakhstan in international expositions. This began in 2005 with Kazakh participation in the Aichi, Japan Expo. Energetic Kazakh contributions to the Saragossa Expo in 2008 and Shanghai Expo followed in 2010. With a South Korean Expo at Yeosu on the horizon for 2012, Kazakhstan embraced the notion of hosting an expo as a mechanism and platform to engage with the world. In 2011, the country launched its bid to host the 2017 Expo in Astana. In the summer of 2012, during the run-up to the voting for the 2017 host city, Kazakhstan delivered a spectacular contribution to the Yeosu Expo. Although the theme of oceans was unpromising for a landlocked country like Kazakhstan, the country finessed the issues by focusing on traditional music and dance. Astana's eventual bid beat out that of Liege, Belgium in the voting that autumn. The Kazakh contribution to the Milan Expo of 2015 was even more accomplished. The pavilion included a traditional music and art performances (including live sand painting), a virtual reality over-flight of the country, a feature of agricultural difficulties such as desertification and an excellent restaurant with horse meat proudly atop the menu.

The eventual Astana Expo of 2017 was, however, a mixed bag. The architecture—a ring of exhibition spaces around a national exhibit in a giant sphere—was stunning. The theme of "future energy" brought relevant technologies and debates to the fore, and the usual suspects turned out to introduce themselves to Kazakh audiences. France and Germany were especially well-represented, and the pavilions that put on shows like the South Koreans were appreciated by locals. The downside was comparatively lower levels of attendance, widely assumed to be owing to the price of entry. The Expo failed to hit 4,000,000 visitors (compared to the more than 8,000,000 who had attended the similar scale 2012 Expo in South Korea). It was the lowest attendance since the scandalously underwhelming Genoa Expo of 1992. The attempts of the government to boost attendance attracted some negative press, as did logistical issues around the importation of exhibits. Some pavilions had such difficulty bringing materials into the country that they were unable to operate gift shops. Yet the success may be judged by the fact that fellow former Soviet state Azerbaijan has hastened to develop its own bid to host a major expo in Baku in 2025.

Despite a less than perfect outcome, the value of the Expo in positioning Kazakhstan as a regional leader should not be dismissed. The desire to be known is such that even a virtual slander like the 2006 comedy film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America For Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* is seen as a PR gift by some Kazakh officials. Knowing that Kazakhstan is the "Borat country" gives it a place on the mental map of Western audiences which Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan lack. It is a starting point from which more accurate knowledge and an awareness of the country's relevance can be built.

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The path Kazakhstan has taken toward reputational security does raise questions. The leadership has plainly made choices as to the area in which it will pursue international relevance, prioritizing institutional participation and mega events over achievements in, say, the field of human rights which might require a trade off in the ability of the government to manage and direct its own population. True reputational security for Kazakhstan will require attention to its reputation for corruption, which although the best in the Central Asian region, according to Transparency International, still requires work. Yet one gift of Kazakhstan is the government's unshakable focus on the future. Themes of innovation and sustainable energy were at the heart of Expo 2017 Astana. At a time of mounting international crisis, it is important to remember that visions of the future underlay humanity's escape from the World Wars—and the Cold War too. Projects which direct our collective attention away from our differences and obsessions with either an idealized past or historical pain should be welcomed, and even celebrated, right now. Whether in Astana, Moscow, Beijing or Washington, humanity needs horizons. Governments would do well to consider what we can all do together, not to make country X great again or to avenge the historic slights against country Y, but to make the planet we all share great for everyone with a stake in the future.

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *This piece, written by [Nicholas J. Cull](#), originally appeared in the 2018 [Soft Power 30](#)  report.*

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