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Kazakhstan Keeping Nuclear Arms, Republic's President Tells Baker

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Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev said tonight that this newly independent Central Asian state will remain a nuclear power as long as Russia has atomic weapons, a statement at odds with Russian President Boris Yeltsin's prediction that eventually only Russia would be a nuclear power in the new alliance of former Soviet republics.

Nazarbayev also said that Kazakhstan is not yet ready to agree to Yeltsin's proposal that Russia inherit the dissolving Soviet Union's U.N. Security Council seat, insisting that the issue would have to be decided by the new Commonwealth of Independent States.

His remarks underscored the continued jockeying and uncertainty about the shape of the commonwealth now being assembled in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet central government. The leaders of several republics appear to be vying for power within the new arrangement, and their differing visions of it have not been reconciled.

Nazarbayev spoke at a news conference here with Secretary of State James A. Baker III, whose talks in Kazakhstan and neighboring Kirghizia today suggested that even thousands of miles from Moscow political leaders are preparing for the departure of President Mikhail Gorbachev's central government.

Nazarbayev, long one of Gorbachev's strongest supporters, spoke of Gorbachev's term as if it were over and recalled that he had backed Gorbachev's perestroika reforms from the beginning to the "very end." President Askar Akayev of Kirghizia said the union "had ceased to exist" and asserted that his republic would handle its own foreign relations and seek its own United Nations seat.

Nine republics have accepted invitations to a meeting here this weekend to discuss signing a document establishing a "Commonwealth of Euro-Asian Independent States," according to Kazakh officials. The accord is to be an extension of the agreement nine days ago among the leaders of Ukraine, Russia and Byelorussia.

Kazakh officials said the new agreement is necessary because the Central Asian nations want to join the commonwealth on equal terms with the three founding members.

One of the most urgent questions surrounding the dissolution of the Soviet empire has been what will happen to the strategic nuclear weapons stationed in four republics -- Russia, Kazakhstan, Byelorussia and Ukraine.

The United States has said it wants to avoid the creation of any new nuclear-armed states in the region, and Baker has been seeking assurances that the nuclear weapons will remain under a single authority and that measures will be taken to prevent proliferation.

Yeltsin and other leaders of the republics have been discussing a joint treaty committing themselves to common control of the nuclear weapons under a single authority. Tonight, Nazarbayev reiterated his support for a joint command "at one site." He added: "This will include also elements of control and monitoring over all of these nuclear weapons and also a provision for the non-proliferation" of weapons.

Although there appears to be agreement on a joint command, U.S. officials have expressed concern about ambiguity in the statements of leaders of some republics on the question of when and if they will destroy nuclear warheads stationed on their soil. Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk has said his republic will eventually become a non-nuclear state but has indicated the weapons may not be destroyed right away. Nazarbayev also said he favors eventual global nuclear disarmament, but that for now the weapons will remain on Kazakh soil.

According to a recent study by Harvard University's Center for Science and International Affairs, Kazakhstan has two silo fields for SS-18 intercontinental ballistic missiles -- with a total of 104 missiles of 10 warheads each -- and one base for strategic bombers. Most experts believe it will be impossible for any one of the newly independent republics to launch an attack with the weapons it holds, but the nuclear arms have become political bargaining chips in the discussions about what will replace Soviet central authority.

Yeltsin said Monday in Moscow that Ukraine and Byelorussia are committed to eventually destroying the nuclear arms on their soil. Yeltsin said further discussions are required with Kazakhstan. But, he said, referring to the non-Russian republics, "Three of them would eventually become non-nuclear states, with an exception for the time being of Russia."

Nazarbayev offered a different scenario. "President Yeltsin and I talked about having nuclear arms stay both in Russia and stay in Kazakhstan," he said.

Kazakhstan's presidential spokesman also emphasized to reporters that the republic, whose parliament declared its independence this week, would not relinquish its nuclear arms as long as weapons remain in Russia. "The president of Kazakhstan has not agreed with this," said spokesman Seitcazy Mataev. "It's not acceptable."

Other republics and the United States may question whether Kazakhstan should be recognized as an independent state possessing nuclear weapons. Baker has said frequently in recent days that all new republics seeking recognition from the United States will have to agree to respect human rights; establish democracy and free markets; and limit nuclear weapons. Baker appears to be trying to use the carrot of recognition to influence decisions made by the republics' leaders during this period of political transition.

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