

Kazakhstan: U.S., NATO Seek Military Outpost Between Russia And China

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On April 11, the day before the two-day Nuclear Security Summit held in Washington, DC, U.S. President Barack Obama met with his Kazakh counterpart Nursultan Nazarbayev and their deliberations resulted in the U.S. obtaining the right to fly troops and military equipment over (and later directly into) the territory of Kazakhstan for the escalating war in Afghanistan.

Michael McFaul, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs and senior director of Russian and Eurasian Affairs at the United States National Security Council, "told reporters in a conference call that the agreement will allow troops to fly directly from the United States over the North Pole to the region."

McFaul directly stated, "This will save money; it will save time in terms of moving our troops and supplies needed into the theater." The Washington Post cited other White House officials claiming "Sunday's meeting between Obama and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev was the turning point," [1] an allusion to the advance it signified over the last agreement on military transport for the Afghan war signed between the two countries in January, which permitted the transport of only non-lethal American military supplies and equipment across the country by rail.

The government of Kazakhstan has also allowed limited flights containing non-lethal military cargo over its territory, but that entailed a lengthy and circuitous route from the eastern United States to Europe and over the Caspian Sea to Kazakhstan, ultimately headed to the Manas Transit Center in Kyrgyzstan, which is currently in jeopardy after the overthrow of the government in that nation on April 7.

However, now "Kazakhstan has agreed to let the United States fly troops and weapons over its territory, a deal that opens a direct and faster route over the North Pole for American forces and lethal equipment headed to Afghanistan." [2]

The new arrangement will also substitute for a previous one under which U.S. military cargo planes flew combat troops and materiel to the Ramstein Air Base in Germany, from there to air bases in Kuwait and other destinations in the Persian Gulf, circumventing Iran which forbids American military overflights, and then either directly into the Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan or to Pakistan. The second option often entails using treacherous land routes subject to regular attacks by militants on the Pakistani side of the border.

The Pentagon has also been working on a sea and land route beginning at the Georgian Black Sea port of Poti and from there to fellow Caucasus nation Azerbaijan and that country's Caspian Sea neighbors Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, conspicuously

circumventing Russia, as do the oil and natural gas pipelines the West has promoted to transport hydrocarbons in the opposite direction, from Kazakhstan to the Black Sea.

“The new route over the North Pole to Bagram Air Base, the military’s main air hub in Afghanistan, will allow troops to fly direct from the United States in a little more than 12 hours.” [3]

The Air Force Times detailed that “Flying over Russia and Kazakhstan means Air Force cargo jets could fly from Alaska to Afghanistan without refueling, U.S. Transportation Command officials have said. Chartered passenger jets could leave from Chicago and fly over the North Pole to deliver troops.” [4]

Colonel Jon Chicky, a faculty member at the National Defense University, said of the new transport route, “Just look at a map, it’s a lot easier to go over the polar ice cap than all the way across the Atlantic and Europe.” [5]

U.S. military planes would necessarily have to fly over Russia from the North Pole to reach Kazakhstan, but there is no information that Russia has approved such overflights.

Sunday’s deal is the latest in a steady and expanding series of moves by the Pentagon and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to establish a permanent military outpost in Kazakhstan, the most critically important spot on the earth for the West to monitor its two main potential challengers and to hold joint Russian-Chinese initiatives like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization [6] in check (if not to tear the heart out of them). Kazakhstan is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as well as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) along with Russia and five other former Soviet states. In terms of land mass it is the second largest member of the CSTO and the third most populous behind Russia and Uzbekistan.

The geopolitical significance of the country in general has not escaped the U.S. since the day the Soviet Union was fragmented into its fifteen federal republics in 1991 and has been an even greater cynosure of Washington’s attention since Barack Obama was elected president on November 4, 2008.

And with good reason. Kazakhstan borders Kyrgyzstan, the most vital transit country for the war in Afghanistan, where according to U.S. Central Command 50,000 U.S. troops passed through on their way to and from Afghanistan last month alone. [7]

It also borders Uzbekistan, which evicted U.S. military forces in 2005, and fellow Caspian Sea nation Turkmenistan, a country in transition since the death of President Saparmurat Niyazov in 2006 and until now the only state from the Balkans to Central Asia not pulled into the Pentagon’s and NATO’s greater Afghan war network.

Kazakhstan has a 950-mile (1,533-kilometer) border with China and a 4,030-mile (6,846-kilometer) one with Russia, the longest continuous border between any two nations in the world. It is the second largest nation in terms of territory to emerge from the Soviet Union next to Russia and the ninth biggest in the world.

As stated during a visit to the country by then NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer in June of 2009, it is “a nation almost the size of the whole of western Europe and bordering Russia and China [and] is also part of all the economic and military alliances of its

two powerful neighbours, including the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO).” [8]

Kazakhstan has projected oil reserves of 100-110 billion barrels, which if realized will be the third largest in the world. Its projected natural gas reserves are as high as 5 trillion cubic meters.

It possesses the world’s largest reserves of uranium, barite, lead and tungsten, and last year became the world’s leading uranium producer. In addition, the Central Asian nation has the second largest reserves of chromite, silver, and zinc, the third largest of manganese, and substantial if not yet reliably established deposits of copper, gold and iron ore. [9]

The country has the largest economy in Central Asia and more energy reserves than the other four nations there combined.

It is also home to the Baikonur Cosmodrome, the world’s first and largest space launch facility, from which the first manned space flight was launched in 1961. It is currently managed by the Russian Federal Space Agency and the Russian Space Forces under a lease with the Kazakh government. Should Kazakhstan shift further into the U.S. and NATO orbit that arrangement will be subject to change.

In appreciation of its geostrategic location and role, Kazakhstan was brought into NATO’s counterintuitively-named Partnership for Peace (PfP) program in 1994 and the bloc’s 50-nation (28 full member and 22 PfP states) Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council.

In 2003 the U.S. Defense Department signed a five-year Military Cooperation Plan with the country, the only nation in the region the Pentagon has such a program with, which included “such important directions of cooperation as the development of the peacekeeping potential of the Kazakh Armed Forces, improvement of the Kazakhstan system of military education and mutual participation in trainings.” Kazakh troops were deployed to Iraq in the same year.

Over 300 Kazakh officers have been sent for training to U.S. military institutions, including the West Point Military Academy and the National Defense University, as part of the agreement

As the Kazakh news source from which the above information originated reported in January of 2009, “Realization of the first Plan successfully ended in 2008. In February 2008 a 2008-2012 Cooperation Plan was signed. Kazakh-American cooperation in defense and security has achieved significant results within implementation of the first plan.” [10]

Before that, “Kazakhstan signed two agreements supporting U.S. and NATO military operations in Afghanistan, within the framework of the Enduring Freedom plan, on December 15, 2001, and on June 10, 2002,” [11] which were formally ratified by the nation’s senate in late 2008.

In December of 2008 the Jamestown Foundation, a U.S. think tank concentrating on the former Soviet Union, featured an analysis of “the renewed focus by American President-elect Barack Obama on Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan,” which is worth quoting from at some length.

The nation even then, sixteen months ago, was being prepared for a larger, even preeminent, role in expanding U.S. war plans for South Asia in light of “Obama’s pledge to

raise the American contingent in Afghanistan to 20,000 [as] the U.S. forces will not be able to rely entirely on Manas airfield in Kyrgyzstan.”

More importantly, “by expanding their military presence in Central Asia, the United States and NATO forces are determined to squeeze Russia and China out of the oil-rich and strategically important region.

“This strategy also corresponds to the U.S.-backed plan of creating a Greater Central Asia extending from Afghanistan, through the Central Asian states, to the Middle East.”

Specifically, by ratifying the previously-mentioned military agreements, “allowing U.S. and NATO coalition forces to use Almaty airport as an emergency airfield for fighter planes flying on missions to Afghanistan,” the Kazakh Senate provided the U.S. “an opportunity to watch and gather intelligence on Chinese nuclear facilities....” [12]

“It appears that for Kazakhstan, NATO, and the United States, the backup airfield will be a symbol of military cooperation between the West and Central Asia....” [13]

The month after that feature appeared, Indian political analyst M. K. Bhadrakumar wrote a column which featured these observations:

“The US is working on the idea of ferrying cargo for Afghanistan via the Black Sea to the port of Poti in Georgia and then dispatching it through the territories of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. A branch line could also go from Georgia via Azerbaijan to the Turkmen-Afghan border.

“The project, if it materializes, will be a geopolitical coup – the biggest ever that Washington would have swung in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus. At one stroke, the US will be tying up military cooperation at the bilateral level with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

“Furthermore, the US will be effectively drawing these countries closer into NATO’s partnership programs.”

“Besides, The US will have virtually dealt a blow to the Russia-led Collective Security Treat Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).”

“[T]he proposed land route covering Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan can also be easily converted into an energy corridor and become a Caspian oil and gas corridor bypassing Russia.

“Such a corridor has been a long-cherished dream for Washington. Furthermore, European countries will feel the imperative to agree to the US demand that the transit countries for the energy corridor are granted NATO protection in one form or the other. That, in turn, leads to NATO’s expansion into the Caucasus and Central Asia.

“The time may not be far off before they begin to sense that the ‘war on terror is providing a convenient rubric under which the US is incrementally securing for itself a permanent abode in the highlands of the Hindu Kush and the

Pamirs, Central Asian steppes and the Caucasus that form the strategic hub overlooking Russia, China, India and Iran.” [14]

Bhadrakumar’s contentions had been verified before the fact as it were in June of 2008 when then U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Matthew Bryza delivered an address in Washington, DC called “Invigorating the U.S.-Turkey Strategic Partnership,” which contained the following comments:

“Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev welcomed international investors to help develop the Caspian Basin’s mammoth oil and gas reserves. Then-Turkish President Suleyman Demirel worked with these leaders, and with Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, to develop a revitalized concept of the Great Silk Road in the version of an East-West Corridor of oil and natural gas pipelines.”

“The East-West Corridor we had been building from Turkey and the Black Sea through Georgia and Azerbaijan and across the Caspian became the strategic air corridor, and the lifeline, into Afghanistan allowing the United States and our coalition partners to conduct Operation Enduring Freedom.”[15]

If the former Indian diplomat asserted that the military corridor from the Black Sea to Afghanistan could be transformed into a strategic energy route running in the opposite direction, the State Department’s Bryza had already revealed that under the guise of solely oil and natural gas projects the U.S. and its NATO allies had long in advance of the so-called global war on terror created the infrastructure required to move troops and equipment from Europe to Central and South Asia.

In November of 2008 U.S. Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman was in the capital of Azerbaijan, on the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea, and said eleven days after the election of Barack Obama that “the incoming Obama administration will maintain an interest in Caspian Sea energy resources.

“It is my firm belief that this effort and this region of the world will also be a priority for the next administration.” [16]

To give an indication of how far-reaching U.S. plans are for a trans-Eurasian (Caspian-to-Black-to-Baltic Seas) energy strategy to drive Russia out of the European market, Bodman’s comments were delivered at an energy summit attended by the presidents and other leading officials of host nation Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Turkey and Ukraine.

At the same time “the state energy firms of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan agreed [on November 14] to begin shipping Kazakh oil across the Caspian Sea from 2013.

“The deal follows up on a 2006 deal for Kazakhstan to partake in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline project, a pipeline that bypasses Russia to transfer oil from Azerbaijan, through Georgia, to Turkey.” [17]

The month before Washington’s Special Envoy for European Affairs and Special Envoy for Eurasian Energy C. Boyden Gray, speaking of the Nabucco natural gas project, spoke in a

vein similar to Bodman's in stating "a deal may soon be sealed allowing natural gas from ex-Soviet nations to reach western Europe bypassing Russian territory." [18]

The following January, after the change in U.S. presidential administrations, U.S. ambassador to Kazakhstan Richard Hoagland stated that "President Barack Obama's administration will adhere to policies to develop alternative energy routes from Central Asia," and "I am quite confident that Obama's administration will adhere to several alternative-routes policies for hydrocarbons transportation." [19]

Shortly afterward the same American envoy promoted the long-nurtured U.S. ambition to construct an oil pipeline under the Caspian Sea to transport Kazakh oil to Azerbaijan and connect with the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline into Europe, a project fiercely opposed by fellow Caspian nations Iran and Russia for both environmental and economic reasons.

In February of last year Hoagland said: "The U.S. government backs the so-called Kazakh Caspian transport system which calls for supplying crude oil from Eskene in Kurik [in Kazakhstan, the beginning of an Eskene-Kurik-Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan route] via a pipeline and onwards to Baku via tankers....We think the Trans-Caspian pipeline is technically and economically more advantageous than providing supplies via tankers. It is also politically well-grounded." [20]

It was announced in April of 2009 that Barack Obama would be the first American president to visit Kazakhstan, relations with which he described as "strategic." The plan didn't materialize, but may now after the further warming of relations between the two nations. [21]

On June 24-25 of last year NATO held its third-ever Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council Security Forum in the Kazakh capital of Astana, the first conducted outside Europe and on former Soviet space. It focused on "discussions of Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Caucasus and energy security." [22]

Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer presided over the event and said, "My presence here today means that cooperation between NATO and Kazakhstan is deepening." [23] Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian nation with a NATO Individual Partnership Action Plan.

"Today, Kazakhstan is NATO's most active Partner in the Central Asian region. We have also achieved solid progress in defence and military co-operation, particularly in enhancing the ability of our military forces to work together," Scheffer added. [24]

The Kazinform news agency conducted an interview with Scheffer after the forum, a gathering in which "NATO [was] seeking to deepen cooperation with its partner countries in Central Asia - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan," and the Alliance's chief's comments included:

"I do believe that both Kazakhstan and NATO influence each other. Kazakhstan's position as an energy supplier and the political role of your president play an important role in different areas and international organizations active in this region.

"I've just come back from the Palace of the President. We did not only discuss the Central Asian region but the Middle East region as well." [25]

In August U.S. Ambassador Hoagland met with Kazakh Defense Minister Adilbek Dzhaksybekov, and the Kazakh Defense Ministry later issued a statement that said in part: "Speaking about interaction in defense and security, it is necessary to stress the importance of the five-year cooperation plan. Operations are successfully conducted in peacekeeping, training, technical assistance and development of military education.

"During the meeting Kazakh Defense Minister Dzhaksybekov paid special attention to the increased number of actions of the plan of military contacts directed to developing Kazbrig, the study of the advanced experience and organization of the U.S army, as well as the exchange of experience.

"Opportunity for training of teachers of our military institutions in the U.S. Military Academy at West Point is new and a very promising trend. During the training they can familiarize [themselves] with advanced methods of teaching and various training programs." [26]

KAZBRIG is "an airborne assault battalion...for deployment in NATO-led peace support operations" provided by Kazakhstan. [27]

In the same month General David Petraeus, head of U.S. Central Command, visited Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to enlist support for the war in Afghanistan, at the time particularly for the transit of non-lethal military freight. There was speculation that Petraeus was also soliciting troop contributions.

Four months before, NATO's Special Representative for the South Caucasus and Central Asia and Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Security Cooperation and Partnership Robert Simmons, the individual most responsible for extending NATO bases and troop presence from the Balkans to the Chinese border, [28] was quoted saying "NATO is awaiting a decision from Kazakhstan on dispatching a peacekeeping contingent to Afghanistan." [29]

He made that statement while addressing Kazakh journalists at NATO headquarters in Brussels. "Simmons said Kazakh peacekeepers could be sent to Afghanistan and appropriate documents had been developed by NATO and passed to Kazakhstan." [30]

In September Simmons was in Kazakhstan where he "discussed the further development of Kazakhstan-NATO cooperation at a meeting in the Kazakh Senate." [31]

In September U.S. Ambassador Richard Hoagland reiterated the request. While giving a speech at the opening ceremony of the Steppe Eagle-2009 military training exercise which included "1,300 servicemen from Kazakhstan, the UK, and the U.S." and "100 units of combat and special equipment and military transport aircraft" to "check the coordination of Kazbrig units and NATO forces in peacekeeping operations," he "offered to Kazakhstan to take part in the peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan." [32]

In the same month NATO held its first military exercise in Central Asia, ZHETYSU 2009, in Kazakhstan. A six-day disaster response exercise, it included 500 Kazakh and an equal amount of NATO and non-Kazakh Partnership for Peace forces.

In early October French President Nicolas Sarkozy visited the capital of Kazakhstan, which took over the chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) this year, and signed a bilateral military agreement which allows "France to use

Kazakh territory and airspace to supply its 3,070 troops deployed in Afghanistan.”

“Paris’s unique relationship with Astana might help secure a policy objective long pursued by Washington and London. This relates to convincing Astana to operationally deploy peacekeepers from its peacekeeping brigade (KAZBRIG) to support the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan.

“U.S. and U.K. military cooperation with Kazakhstan since 2003 has focused, among other key goals, on developing the country’s peace support operations (PSO) capabilities, in line with its NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) goals....” [33]

As part of what was described as a strategic partnership, “The military transit deal had been under discussion for two years and covers both air transit and train transit of French military personnel and equipment via Kazakhstan, according to a French Foreign Ministry spokesman. He said train traffic could then go through neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan where France already has a military presence.” [34]

To again illustrate that the NATO corridor from the Black Sea to Central Asia runs in both directions:

“Kazakhstan also awarded a consortium of French companies a deal to take part in building a crucial \$2 billion oil pipeline linking the vast Kashagan field to the Caspian. Energy supplies through the route will be transported across the inland sea by tanker to Azerbaijan and pumped by pipeline westward to Europe, circumventing Russia....Other commercial accords included an agreement to create a joint venture between the two countries’ state-owned nuclear power companies to produce and market fuel for nuclear power plants.” [35]

Only days earlier it was reported that the governments of Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan had announced further plans for oil transit arrangements between the two countries: “Kazakhstan, Central Asia’s largest oil producer, already ships some of its output by tankers across the Caspian to Baku, where it is fed into the Baku-Ceyhan and Baku-Supsa pipelines....Kazakhstan plans to double oil output to 150 million tonnes a year within the next decade, largely by starting production at Kashagan, the world’s biggest oil find in the last 30 years.” [36]

Earlier in the year the Kazakh Defense Ministry “asked Israel to help it modernize its military and produce weapons that comply with NATO standards.” [37] In July Israeli President Shimon Peres became first high-ranking official of his nation to visit Kazakhstan as well as Azerbaijan. He led a delegation that included Defense Ministry Director-General Pinhas Buchris and “some 60 representatives of military-industrial companies.” [38]

At the time the Jerusalem Post reported that “Kazakhstan’s commitment to purchase satellite and surveillance technology from Israel reflects the growing role of Israeli defense industries in the country.” [39]

The preceding year it was reported that “Jerusalem [has been] supporting the massive Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, or BTC, pipeline that opened its taps across the south Caucasus in 2006.

“The Jewish state also embraced ambitious plans to one day build underwater pipelines beneath the Caspian that would tap into the oil reserves of Kazakhstan and natural-gas fields of Turkmenistan – purportedly the world’s second largest – and deliver them westward along those same BTC pipelines.” The newspaper account added, “the U.S.-led NATO military alliance considers it a top priority, with many of its members frantic about ‘energy security.’” [40]

In mid-October NATO military observers inspected an airfield at the Almaty International Airport in the former Kazakh capital to familiarize themselves with ground assault and airborne units and military aircraft. [41] It is the base that will receive direct military flights from the U.S. in the future.

At the beginning of this year NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen in acknowledging the transit agreement with Kazakhstan for the war in Afghanistan that will involve 150,000 U.S. and NATO troops by August said:

“I am...pleased to announce the finalisation of an agreement with Kazakhstan that will allow the transit of supplies for NATO and Partner forces. I thank the Kazakh Government for coming to this agreement with us. This allows supplies for our forces to start moving from Europe to Afghanistan, beginning in the coming days, complementing the very important transit route through Pakistan. [42]

Slightly over two months later the Pentagon would obtain the right to fly troops and military equipment over Kazakhstan via the Arctic Circle.

If developments proceed in the manner they are headed, the Afghan war will secure for the Pentagon and NATO a bulwark in the heart of Eurasia and a permanent military presence in a country bordering almost 5,000 miles of Russian and Chinese territory, far broader in scope than comparable plans for Mongolia. [43]

Notes

- 1) Washington Post, April 12, 2010
- 2) New York Times, April 12, 2010
- 3) Ibid
- 4) Air Force Times, April 12, 2010
- 5) Eurasia Insight, April 12, 2010
- 6) The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Prospects For A Multipolar World
Stop NATO, May 21, 2009

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2009/08/29/150>

- 7) Associated Press, April 8, 2010
- 8) EUobserver, June 26, 2009
- 9) About Kazakhstan

http://aboutkazakhstan.com/Kazakhstan_Overview.shtml

- 10) Kazinform, January 14, 2009

- 11) Ibid
- 12) Eurasia Daily Monitor
The Jamestown Foundation
December 5, 2008
- 13) Ibid
- 14) The Day After, January 2, 2009
- 15) U.S. Department of State, June 24, 2008
- 16) Press TV, November 15, 2008
- 17) Ibid
- 18) PanArmenian.net, October 13, 2008
- 19) Trend News Agency, January 28, 2009
- 20) Trend News Agency, February 21, 2009
- 21) Russian Information Agency Novosti, April 7, 2009
- 22) Trend News Agency, May 29, 2009
- 23) Trend News Agency, June 25, 2009
- 24) North Atlantic Treaty Organization, June 24, 2009
- 25) Kazinform, July 5, 2009
- 26) Trend News Agency, August 7, 2009
- 27) North Atlantic Treaty Organization, February 24, 2009
- 28) Mr. Simmons' Mission: NATO Bases From Balkans To Chinese Border
Stop NATO, March 4, 2009

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2009/08/27/mr-simmons-mission-nato-bases-from-balkans-to-chinese-border>

- 29) EurasiaNet, April 24, 2009
- 30) Interfax, May 15, 2009
- 31) Trend News Agency, September 11, 2009
- 32) Interfax, September 14, 2009
- 33) Eurasia Daily Monitor, October 13, 2009
- 34) Trend News Agency, October 7, 2009
- 35) Ibid
- 36) Reuters/Azeri Press Agency, September 26, 2009
- 37) Agence France-Presse, January 22, 2009
- 38) Ynetnews, June 28, 2009
- 39) Jerusalem Post, July 1, 2009
- 40) Jewish Telegraph Agency, December 18, 2008
- 41) Trend News Agency, October 13, 2009
- 42) North Atlantic Treaty Organization, January 27, 2010
- 43) Mongolia: Pentagon Trojan Horse Wedged Between China And Russia
Stop NATO, March 31, 2010

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/03/31/mongolia-pentagon-trojan-horse-wedged-between-china-and-russia>

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