

“NATO’s efforts to win clout in Russia’s Central Asian backyard”

U.S. and UK help train Kazakh troops in Russia's backyard

By [Global Research](#)

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ILI MILITARY RANGE Kazakhstan: About 50 U.S. and British troops joined more than 1,000 Kazakh service members Monday for a two-week military exercise, a sign of NATO’s efforts to win clout in Russia’s Central Asian backyard.

The eighth annual ‘Steppe Eagle’ program aims to train Kazakh troops for future deployment with NATO peacekeepers.

“We will leave here better comrades and with our vision for the future reinforced,” Lieutenant General William G. Webster, commander of U.S. ground forces in Central Asia and the Middle East, said at the opening ceremony.

Kazakhstan, which covers an area five times the size of France, this year holds the rotating chair of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), a European security watchdog that includes both NATO countries and Russia.

“As chairman of the OSCE, Kazakhstan has pushed forward issues of enhancing European security, which extend far beyond the boundaries of Europe itself,” said Saken Zhasuzakov, first deputy defence minister and Kazakh armed forces chief of staff.

After the ceremonial raising of the Kazakh, U.S. and British flags at the Ili military range, 50 km (30 miles) north of Kazakhstan’s largest city Almaty, troops marched past to the accompaniment of music from a 10-person military brass band.

The United States is vying with Russia for influence in ex-Soviet Central Asia, a region bordering Afghanistan and Iran that the Kremlin sees as within its sphere of influence.

Washington operates an important air base in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan supplying its troops in Afghanistan, and relies on other Central Asia states for ground shipments of supplies.

So far, only small numbers of Kazakhs have participated in non-combat roles in Iraq. British and U.S. servicemen said Kazakh troops were unlikely to be deployed in Afghanistan due to historical links. However, they said future deployments in places like Kosovo, Darfur and Western Sahara would be possible.

The United States is represented at the training exercise by around 45 servicemen. Britain sent five participants, and will provide an assessment team to review the Kazakh troops at the end of the exercise.

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