

U.S., Britain Help Train Kazakh Troops

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A Kazakh soldier filming during the Steppe Eagle opening ceremony. **Shamil Zhumatov**

ILI MILITARY RANGE, Kazakhstan — About 50 U.S. and British troops joined more than 1,000 Kazakh soldiers on 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 Webster, commander of U.S. ground forces in Central Asia and the Middle East, said at the opening ceremony.

After the ceremonial raising of the Kazakh, U.S. and British flags at the Ili military range, 50 kilometers north of Kazakhstan's largest city Almaty, troops marched past to the accompaniment of music from a 10-member military brass band.

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

of the exercise.

"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 defense minister and Kazakh armed forces chief of staff.

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

The United States is vying with Russia for influence in 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 neighboring Kyrgyzstan that supplies its troops in Afghanistan, and relies on other Central Asian states for ground shipments of supplies.

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

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