

ENHANCING KAZAKHSTAN'S PEACEKEEPING CAPABILITIES: INTEROPERABILITY AND REGIONAL COOPERATION

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Prior to September 2001, it is fair to say that the principal motivation behind foreign involvement and interest in Central Asia remained strategic and economic, energy; and for the United States its interests were generally secondary and derivative of the interests of others, allies, competitors and commercial actors. Post 11 September and as a result of its commitment to its international, anti-terrorist campaign, however, U.S. relations with the states of Central Asia and its security interests in the region changed dramatically. These states are now on the front lines of the war on terrorism and several states continue to provide critical support to U.S. and allied military forces conducting operations in Afghanistan. The U.S. military has been much more proactive in the region, recruiting states into the counter terrorist coalition, establishing a presence, and expanding its security cooperation and direct military assistance

programs, as well as encouraging several of its allies to do the same. More than ten years after independence, many of these states remain unstable and are confronting growing problems with the illegal cross border movement of contraband, armed opposition and terrorist groups, the possible spillover of combat operations from neighboring states, and tension and disputes among neighbors that could escalate. In this environment the local militaries have a valuable function, if properly structured, equipped and trained to confront these types of missions. In most cases the Soviet legacy has hampered in developing needed capabilities more than helped them and they are not adequately prepared. Moreover, it is unlikely that they will be able to responsively make the necessary transition on their own, without outside assistance being required.

In the post-9/11 world, U.S. and allied formations are operating in several of these states and it

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becomes more imperative that the capabilities of these local forces be improved, along with their ability to operate with Western ground and air units. The following analysis charts the course of the var-

ied progress of Kazakhstan's peacekeeping capabilities, and its focus on interoperability with NATO forces will be considered together with the goal of promoting regional security cooperation.

CENTRASBAT as an Engagement Tool in Central Asia

Since the dissolution of the Soviet State in 1991 and the establishment of five independent states in Central Asia, the United States and NATO have struggled to establish a meaningful and consistent security policy toward the region and each of its states. Washington's modest military engagement efforts initially centered on the development of the Central Asian Peacekeeping Battalion (CENTRASBAT), peacekeeping related training, and English-language training (ELT). NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program complemented this effort and was seen as a means to distribute the cost of engagement and training throughout the Alliance and hopefully supported through bilateral programs from other NATO-member states.

Overview of CENTRASBAT

CENTRASBAT was formed in 1996 as a result of the agreement reached by the Council of Defense Ministers from the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC)—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. CENTRASBAT thus emerged as a tripartite peacekeeping battalion and U.S. and NATO support was designed to enhance the interaction with the Central Asian states, initially under the sponsorship of the U.S. Atlantic Command, through peacekeeping and humanitarian exercises. This involved Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, with participation from Azerbaijan, Georgia, Mongolia, Russia, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States and Turkey. Tajikistan joined the CAEC in 1998.

In August 1997, CENTRASBAT trained at Fort Bragg, North Carolina as part of an eight-nation exercise. On 14 September, 1997, 500 U.S. and 40 Central Asian troops boarded planes at Pope Air force Base, North Carolina, for an 18-hour, 7,700 mile non-stop flight to Central Asia, with the drop done in Kazakhstan near Shymkent city, witnessing the longest airborne operation in history.¹ In September 1998 U.S. joint forces returned to the region for CENTRASBAT'98. Soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division trained alongside CENTRASBAT, with participation by Azerbaijan, Georgia and Russia. 259 U.S. personnel took part, in addition to 272 from CENTRASBAT and 200 from the other four countries.²

The field exercises conducted in 1997 and 1998 were augmented by the seminar series hosted 13-19 May, 1999 at U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), Tampa, Florida. Marking the transfer of Central Asia into the Area of Responsibility (AOR) of CENTCOM, this supplied a unique opportunity to exchange ideas and openly discuss methods and techniques of peacekeeping.³

¹ See: Sh. Gareyev, "Military Cooperation: Uzbekistan and the U.S.A.," Winter 1997-1998 [www.pacom.mil/forum/UZBEK.html]. Four of the Central Asian Republics joined NATO's PfP in 1994, Tajikistan finally joined in 2002. On multilateral military exercises see: J. Moffat, "Central Asia: U.S. to Participate in Joint Military Exercise," *RFE/RL*, 29 August, 1997.

² See: "CENTRASBAT'98," Defense Technical Information Center Web Site [<http://www.dtic.mil/soldiers/feb1999/features/>].

³ See: J. Nichol, "Central Asia's New States: Political Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests," *Congressional Research Service*, 18 May, 2001 [<http://www.cnie.org/nle/inter-76.html>].

CENTRASBAT'2000, held from 10 to 18 September, 2000 in Almaty, saw U.S. CENTCOM personnel joined by elements from the 82nd Airborne Division of Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and the 5th Special Forces Group of Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Its purpose was to conduct a peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance field exercise. The tense situation in the Batken Region in 2000 led to the withdrawal of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan from the exercise. CENTRASBAT'2000 was divided into four phases: deployment and opening ceremonies, unit planning process and preparations, a tactical field training exercise (FTX) and the closing ceremonies and redeployment. During the FTX, many aspects of peacekeeping operations were covered, including refugee control, checkpoint outposts, and patrolling and security operations. In 2001 a command post exercise (CPX) was held in Ramstein, Germany, and the FTX resumed in 2002.⁴

These exercises did achieve a great deal, but the goal of assisting in developing a Central Asian peacekeeping battalion functioning and sustainable at NATO interoperable standards was unrealizable in practical terms. Economic weakness within the region coupled with a lack of political will in the capitals of NATO member states, meant that there was never any question of achieving the level of necessary support, such as had proven accessible in the case of developing the Baltic combined Peacekeeping Battalion (BALTBAT). Within the region, attention was shifting toward enhancing national peacekeeping capabilities.

There was no combined planning or training activities taking place; it occurred only at the national (MOD or company) level. This reflected the unwillingness of national political leaders to release control of CENTRASBAT policies and planning to their MOD and the combined battalion headquarters. Efforts to standardize peacekeeping (PK) training across CENTRASBAT consequently failed. Interoperability problems with a NATO contingent were never merely a technological issue, resulting from differences in operational procedures and techniques. Soviet military doctrine, tactics, and operational procedures and techniques were the military tradition, and that tradition determined how these armies think, operate, and train. How the Soviet military operated was markedly different from that of the U.S. or any other Western army. The differences could easily lead to confusion and mistakes.⁵

The problems created by misunderstandings and unanticipated actions during an operation can be further magnified by the lack of a common operational language. English is the commonly accepted operational language for Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs), and the CENTRASBAT states did not adequately prioritize the acceleration of their ELT programs. Furthermore, CENTRASBAT was unable to technically interface with its operational partners and their information management systems. Soviet tactical communications common to CENTRASBAT could not interface with U.S. or NATO communication or information management systems. CENTRASBAT'2000 may have been a final point for the unit. The following year the exercise in Germany was represented by separate Central Asian nations. It has now effectively been disbanded.

Kazakhstan's Peacekeeping Infrastructure

Kazakhstan emerged from its experience of CENTRASBAT in the 1990s with valuable lessons and more of an appreciation of the practical difficulties involved in achieving NATO interoperability for a peacekeeping unit. But it had also gained in its progress in key areas. Its peacekeeping infrastructure had markedly improved. More officers were gaining proficient ELT skills; the training in this area had reached a good standard. Kazakhstani PK training was becoming more advanced, whilst its participation in PfP

⁴ See: "NATO PfP Exercise Cooperative Nugget'97" [www.saclant.nato.int/pio/EVENTS/Exercises/COOP%20Nugget/cn97.htm]; "Fact Sheet on CENTRASBAT'2000," www.usembassy.uz/centcom/military.htm; "Exercise Cooperative Osprey 2001," February 2001, NATO Web Site [www.nato.int/docu/ims/2001/i010227e.htm].

⁵ Author's interviews with western military officers, October 2003.

exercises further increased during the period. Kazakhstan's military facilities capable of supporting PK training, including training ranges, were equally good and its permanent facilities had reached high standards. One key weakness remained, in common with the militaries of the region, lacking operational experience.⁶

The Formation and Structure of KAZBAT

Kazakhstan's own peacekeeping battalion (KAZBAT) was created on 31 January, 2000. The battalion is an extremely complex unit, which continues to evolve as training, exercises and equipment improve in line with the officially stated policy of achieving NATO interoperability.⁷ Its development has been rapid and will continue to progress toward that goal in the next five years. In what follows, only a brief outline of its structure and challenges will be offered since it is a complex structure, prone to further changes and with that caveat, some recommendations will be made on areas within which NATO members may target their assistance programs.

<i>The Structure of KAZBAT</i>	
Commander	Lt. Col. Zhanibek Sharipov
Location	Kapchagai
Commanding Officers	93
Warrant Officers	63
NCOs	63
Privates	322
Total Personnel	541
<i>S o u r c e:</i> Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Kazakhstan.	

The battalion itself is placed under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Zhanibek Sharipov and is located at Kapchagai, 70 km north of Almaty. KAZBAT is 100% staffed with professional personnel serving on contracts. These are drawn from the 35th air assault brigade based in Almaty. In fact, Major-General Saken Zhasuzakov, former commander of the mobile forces, played a significant role during the formative years of the battalion. It has access to good quality training facilities, including airdrop ranges, firing ranges and an MOD Linguistic Center.⁸ Within its structure, emphasis has been placed upon the formation of an NCO corps, providing enhanced leadership skills for the management of the battalion. As can be seen from the table above, the battalion also suffers from top-heavy management, which can present its own unique problems. By comparison, a similar U.S. or NATO battalion may have around 46 officers, including one Commanding Officer (CO), a Deputy CO or Chief of Staff, staff officers such as Operations Officer, Intelligence Officer, etc., and three to five company commanders and 1 warrant officer (WO).⁹

⁶ Author's interviews with western military officers and officials from the Kazakhstani MOD, October/November 2003.

⁷ See: "KAZBAT Will Be Equipped on NATO Standards," *Kazinform News Agency*, Astana, 28 October, 2002.

⁸ Author's interviews with military officials from the Kazakhstani MOD, November 2003.

⁹ The notion of WO is not very important in a U.S. battalion as the senior ranking NCO would be the Sergeant-Major assisted at company levels by First Sergeants. See: *U.S. Army: Heavy, Light Brigade Tables of Organization & Equipment (TOE)* [<http://www.orbat.com/site/toe/index.html>].

The percentage of officers to soldiers in a U.S. battalion runs to around 6-7 percent. For the Kazakhstanis, the difference will be that where the U.S. uses senior NCOs in leadership positions they are most likely forced to use junior officers. This could push the percentage up. But the percentage of officers to soldiers in KAZBAT currently stands at around 40 percent—which does not facilitate individual initiative among the troops.

These managerial issues were highlighted by Lieutenant-Colonel William Lahue, U.S. Security Assistance Officer in Almaty, who has recently worked closely with his Kazakhstani counterparts to promote the interests of KAZBAT, as he noted: “However, sustaining this unit for the long-term requires systemic reforms which will further the minister’s [Altynbaev] force development goal for creating a professional army. For example, the peacekeeping unit will require a complete change in the way officers and NCOs are managed.”¹⁰ These challenges involve developing a thorough understanding of peacekeeping doctrine and introducing military police into the army in order to play a peacekeeping supporting role. The complexity and diversity of the various western national Peace Support Operations (PSO) doctrines makes the task of sharing experience in this area particularly difficult. Nonetheless, it could conceivably be offered in a spirit of cooperation, recognizing Kazakhstan’s need to formulate its own distinct national PSO doctrine, which will take time and must be predicated upon thorough analysis within its MOD. The U.K., for instance, could share a great deal of expertise in this area, as well as offering practical lessons from its own experience of PSO in Iraq, with the 1st Battalion Black Watch deployed to Basra at the early stage of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

In order to remedy these issues, the overall numbers of officers will have to be reduced, with continued focus on developing the NCOs, thus maximizing the efficient management of the battalion. A key challenge in improving the managerial efficiency of KAZBAT will be the acceptance of NCOs as leaders and junior managers.¹¹ NATO members can assist in this area, particularly in sharing their invaluable experience in the transition from Soviet legacy forces to NATO interoperable forces in the new member states such as Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Kazakhstan’s MOD will have to overcome manning problems within KAZBAT, as it functions as a professional unit, necessitating improvements in salary, and social conditions for the NCOs, the latter is the key for NCO corps development.

There is no quick fix to achieving interoperability, but the key will be training to U.S. and NATO standards and exposure to Western militaries through *exercises and operations* and through educational opportunities at staff or war colleges. KAZBAT will, therefore, need continued practical security assistance from NATO member states in the following areas:

- Enhancing and developing further its training facilities
- Supporting its MOD Linguistic Center in Kapchagai, and similar ELT structures
- Deploying Mobile Training Teams (MTTs) to carry out training specifically geared toward the needs of the battalion
- Widening the support from NATO members for the transfer of necessary equipment (HMMWVs, Body Armor, C³I)
- Offering more placements for KAZBAT NCOs at western training centers and military academies
- Sharing expertise and knowledge generally and especially in the cultivation of a military police component in the unit
- Designing and implementing more multinational exercises open to KAZBAT
- Eventual participation of KAZBAT in selected NATO exercises, through PARP, possibly using the 26+1 mechanism.

¹⁰ Lt. Col. W. Lahue, “Security Assistance in Kazakhstan: Building a Partnership for the Future,” *DISAM Journal*, Fall 2002/Winter 2003, p. 14.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

International Support for KAZBAT

The United States has solidly supported the creation and professional development of Kazakhstan's peacekeeping capabilities, reflected in its prioritizing KAZBAT in its five-year military cooperation agreement signed with Kazakhstan in September 2003 and its ongoing estimation of the assistance to KAZBAT as a key foreign policy objective in the region.¹² It is not surprising that the U.S. has also been the lead provider of assistance and training for KAZBAT, sending its Special Forces (SF) 12 man A-teams to train the battalion.¹³ U.S. assistance has taken varied forms, through military-to-military training and assessment, exchange visits and joint exercises. As a result of an assessment of KAZBAT and its needs, Kazakhstan responded by developing the Enhanced International Peacekeeping Cooperation (EIPC) program, through which the U.S. provided an anticipated \$1 million in 2003. Altynbaev created the MOD Center for International Programs (CIP) in April 2002 in order to plan and implement security assistance programs in Kazakhstan. Colonel Igor Mukhamedov was appointed as its first Chief, an experienced officer who had worked in this area since the formation of an international department in Kazakhstan's MOD in 1992.¹⁴ Two key U.S. assistance programs have played a critical part in supporting KAZBAT. The International Military Education and Training (IMET) program which reached \$1,000,000 (\$800,000 in 2001: compared with \$550,000 in 2000) in 2002. Approximately 25-30 percent of IMET funding to Kazakhstan in 2002 was orientated toward peacekeeping training. U.S. military personnel were sent to Almaty in November 2003, training NCO members of KAZBAT. More officers serving in KAZBAT in future will receive training in NATO countries.¹⁵

Dias Asanov, a graduate of the Judicial and Humanitarian University in Kazakhstan, aptly illustrates this. In 2004 he will take up his place at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, joining two other Kazakhstanis already there; including Elena Milyuk, the first ever female cadet from Kazakhstan. Asanov intends to serve as an officer in KAZBAT on his return to Kazakhstan on the completion of his studies in the US.¹⁶

The Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program has enabled KAZBAT to receive ammunition, Highly Mobile Multi Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs), body armor and Thales communications equipment.¹⁷ The first HMMWVs are expected to be sent to Iraq to support KAZBAT engineer contingent.

Bilateral programs between Kazakhstan and Turkey and the United Kingdom have broadly supported American-led engagement activities. Turkey has engaged in joint tactical exercises, assigned a team of instructors to KAZBAT for several months and supplied equipment. It is likely that such assistance will deepen in the coming years as Ankara seeks to play its part in promoting regional security and assisting the Kazakhstani armed forces, which will be reportedly confirmed in a five year cooperation plan between the two countries covering the period 2004-2008.¹⁸

The U.K. assistance has been more modest, restricted to supporting ELT, through the Self-Access Language Center (SAC) in Kapchagai and participating in joint exercises, such as Steppe Eagle in July 2003. The Scots Guards participated with U.S. SF and KAZBAT in high a profile successful exercise.¹⁹ The UK

¹² See: "Foreign Military Training and DoD Engagement activities of Interest: Joint Report to Congress," *III: Foreign Policy Objectives—Newly Independent States (NIS) Region*, May 2003 [www.state.gov/t/pm/rls/fmtrpt/21233.htm]; R.N. McDermott, "The Kazakh Military Looks West," *Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, Washington DC, 16 July, 2003.

¹³ See: G.W. Goodman, Jr., "Central Asian Partners: Low Key Spadework by Green Berets Reaps Valuable Benefits for War in Afghanistan," *Armed Forces Journal International*, January 2002, p. 60.

¹⁴ In September 2003, the CIP was reorganized into the Main Directorate of International Relations (MDIR).

¹⁵ See: "U.S. Servicemen Improving Kazakhstani Sergeants' Skills," *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, Almaty, BBC Monitoring Service, 0748 GMT, 14 November, 2003.

¹⁶ See: "Kazakhstan Sends another Cadet to West Point," *News Bulletin of the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the U.S.A. and Canada* [www.kazakhembus.com], 18 June, 2003.

¹⁷ Author's interviews with military officials from the Kazakhstani MOD, November 2003.

¹⁸ See: "Kazakhstan Receives Military Aid From Turkey," *Khabar TV*, Almaty, BBC Monitoring Service, 1100 GMT, 11 October, 2003; "Kazakhstani Army to Get 1.5 Million Dollars From Turkey," *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, Almaty, 29 October, 2003.

¹⁹ See: "International Military Exercises End in Kazakhstan," *Eurasianet Daily Digest* [http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/kazakhstan/hypermail/200307/0043.shtml], 25 July, 2003.

is keen to support the development of Kazakhstan's peacekeeping capabilities and persuade their counterparts in Kazakhstan of the need to regard peacekeeping training as a process, rather than a fixed and readily achievable set of skills.²⁰

NATO has offered political support for KAZBAT and its enhancement, sending an assessment team to analyze its capabilities, holding numerous talks on the significance of strengthening the peacekeeping dimension in the Kazakhstani armed forces. In addition, representatives from PIMS have sought to bring the benefits of Internet connectivity to KAZBAT, but this process will require more time.²¹

KAZBAT, despite its obvious success, will require continued systemic support and international assistance in order to help Kazakhstan realize its goal in making the battalion interoperable with NATO. International support could be widened to include France and Germany: the former has a bilateral military cooperation agreement with Kazakhstan, and the latter needs to develop further its security relationship with the country. Any assistance given toward enhancing Kazakhstan's peacekeeping capabilities will undoubtedly help, particularly if it promotes further training for members of KAZBAT. It also needs greater participation in international exercises, such as "Steppe Eagle," that these may become the norm in future rather than the result of singular and painstaking efforts. Key individuals within Kazakhstan's MOD, such as Major-General Bulat Sembinov, Deputy Minister of Defense, have played an important role in furthering international cooperation aimed at supporting the advancement of Kazakhstan's peacekeeping capabilities and will also do so in future. Such individuals will demonstrate the determination currently existing in the country to achieve genuine progress in these areas.

Above all, there has to be a coordinated approach, avoiding overlap amongst the various programs or initiatives offered by NATO countries, and this demands carefully long-term handling. Perhaps, a coordination cell, consisting of a designated officer from KAZBAT, the International Cooperation Department of Kazakhstan's MOD, and a NATO liaison officer and U.S. Foreign Area Officer (FAO) and representatives from the UK, Turkey and other NATO members, could be formed in Almaty. Such a cell, operating under the auspices of NATO's PFP, could facilitate longer-term security assistance, planning of training, development of tailor-made programs and monitoring the progress of the battalion. It could liaise between the Kazakhstani MOD, U.S. CENTCOM, NATO, and the MODs of other participating countries.

The Proposed Deployment of KAZBAT to Afghanistan

Clearly, despite its creation and progress in training and receipt of international support, KAZBAT lacked operational experience and therefore military planners in Kazakhstan were justifiably keen to address this situation. Keenly following the progress of the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom, which dealt a serious blow to a key regional threat in stemming the flow of Islamic extremism, opportunities seemed to emerge for such operational experience. Of course, politically such a decision would have been a bold move on the part of Kazakhstan, not least since the memories of the Soviet-Afghan war, 1979-1989, remained fresh and painful. Nonetheless, there is evidence that the government was at least considering the matter with some degree of serious intention, though the deployment to Afghanistan did not occur.

Positive signs were emerging from the Kazakhstani leadership in early 2002, continuing throughout the first half of that year. In January 2002, Army General Mukhtar Altynbaev, Minister of Defense, alluded to the possibility of deploying KAZBAT to Afghanistan, though he cautioned that it would require a "special decision" and must avoid "hot-spots." In his view, the battalion would serve, if the occa-

²⁰ Author's interviews with U.K. MOD, August 2003.

²¹ Author's interviews with military officials from the Kazakhstani MOD, November 2003.

sion arose, in the regions that are most stable, helping to deliver essential humanitarian aid, guarding checkpoints and conducting field engineering.²²

Altynbaev, speaking at a plenary session of the Majlis on 1 February, 2002, seemed to confirm the real prospect of KAZBAT being sent to Afghanistan. Yet he again carefully stressed that a political decision was needed in order to proceed.²³ The nature of that political decision, if taken, was fraught with inherent difficulties. Kazakhstan was already supplying humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, as well as politically supporting Operation Enduring Freedom, granting overflight rights to coalition aircraft, making some kind of physical presence appear natural and providing three airfields for emergency landings.

President Nazarbaev emphasized the humanitarian interests which Kazakhstan had in Afghanistan and speaking to journalists on 7 February, 2002 he made clear his view that KAZBAT could be deployed: "In order to render humanitarian aid for the people of Afghanistan we ship more than two thousand tons of wheat. I am confident in Afghans to remember Kazakhstan's assistance. A Kazakhstani battalion, being formed, is to be sent, though not for battle. Our men will assist in distributing humanitarian aid, keeping law and order and maintaining discipline."²⁴ Promoting good relations with the interim government in Kabul was just as much on his mind as the geopolitical significance of involvement in the country torn apart by more than two decades of war. Crucially, Nazarbaev added that in order to initiate the deployment, Kazakhstan would require a formal invitation, possibly from the U.N.

Potential opposition to sending Kazakhstani soldiers emanated from groups such as the Union of Afghan War Veterans (UAWV), which had held a wreath laying ceremony in Almaty on 15 February, 2002, commemorating the thirteenth anniversary of the last Soviet soldier withdrawing from Afghanistan. Amongst these veterans, whose memories of the many Kazakhstani soldiers who met their deaths in the conflict with the mujahideen are still fresh, opinion could be divided on what assistance the country should offer to the U.S.-led coalition. Yet many, harboring ill-feeling concerning their perceived lack of recognition for their service in the Soviet Afghan war, pointed to the distance of the country from the theater of operations, saying that the threat was not as immediate as Tajikistan's or Uzbekistan's. Other societies, such as the military brotherhood, raised similar concerns, highlighting the contentious nature of sending troops abroad.²⁵

In April 2002, efforts were still being made to calm the rising speculation concerning any possible involvement in Afghanistan. Kasymzhomart Tokaev, Foreign Minister, addressed the Majlis, stating that the peacekeeping battalion would only be sent there in a post-conflict period. It would be conditional, in other words, upon the resolution of the remaining conflict within the country. Simultaneously, Tokaev clarified that the issue was not yet under serious consideration, and though the battalion lacked operational experience, such policy decisions would need to be coordinated with parliament.²⁶ The issue seemed to fade from public attention until June 2002, when Altynbaev paid a visit to the Almaty Higher Military School. Speaking to journalists, he appeared to indicate that KAZBAT would be sent to Afghanistan. For this purpose, KAZBAT was being equipped to NATO standards and, crucially, Kazakhstan joined NATO's Planning and Review Process, which allowed its armed forces to participate in NATO peacekeeping missions and support such operations in conflict zones.²⁷

It seems clear, however, that there was never any real offer by Kazakhstan to send KAZBAT to Afghanistan and that it was not actually requested, either by the U.N. or the coalition countries themselves. What did transpire, based on reporting by the various Kazakhstani government officials, signaled an interest in becoming more involved as part of Kazakhstan's support for the Global War on Terrorism. There was undoubted opposition within Kazakhstan to the sensitive issue of sending young Kazakhstani soldiers to Afghanistan, based on the experience of the Soviet-Afghan war. For many, there was no obvious explanation concerning why such a deployment should take place. Within the govern-

²² See: "Peacekeeping Subdivisions Assemble Volunteers," *Kazinform News Agency*, Astana, 30 January, 2002.

²³ See: "Kazakhstani Peacekeepers May Be Sent to Afghanistan," *Kazinform*, Astana, 1 February, 2002.

²⁴ "President Nazarbaev about Afghanistan, KAZBAT and its Mission," *Kazinform*, 7 February, 2002.

²⁵ See: AP, 15 February, 2002; E. Jumagulov, "Kazakhstan: Afghan Peacekeeping Controversy," *Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)*, London, 15 February, 2002.

²⁶ See: "The Question of Transferring KAZBAT to Afghanistan is not Aroused Yet," *Kazinform*, 22 April, 2002.

²⁷ See: "KAZBAT Will Take Part in Peacekeeping Operation in Afghanistan," *Kazinform*, 1 July, 2002.

ment, reservations were rooted in an awareness of the political issue in the country itself, needing parliamentary approval, and public support and clear-cut definitions of operational role in any peacekeeping operation. The parameters within which such a decision would be taken to send peacekeeping troops beyond the region also emerged through the controversy. Hot-spots must be avoided, minimizing the likelihood of the soldiers engaging in combat, preferring instead to focus on a humanitarian and technical role, preferably under the aegis of the UN. Finally, the speculation concerning the possibility of deploying KAZBAT to Afghanistan served to highlight in minds of Kazakhstani military planners its key need: *operational experience*. Finding such an opportunity would be a difficult task, and one demanding careful and exact political handling.

The Breakthrough: Deployment to Iraq

On 30 May, 2003, Altynbaev formally conveyed an official request from President Nazarbaev for parliamentary approval to send peacekeepers to Iraq, enabling their participation in the post-war reconstruction of the country. Altynbaev said: "Our state received a message from the U.S. administration. They requested sending a Kazakhstani contingent as a part of coalition stabilization forces within the framework of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The participation of Kazakhstan in peacekeeping and reconstruction process of Iraq is the constituent of the state activity plan to ensure and consolidate regional and international security."²⁸ Distinguishing the decision from the possibility of deploying peacekeepers to Afghanistan, Altynbaev presented the case that Kazakhstan responded to a clear and unambiguous request from the US. Altynbaev, no doubt recollecting the concerns over sending peacekeepers abroad in 2002, made clear that the servicemen would be experts in the area and that only volunteer would go to Iraq. It was likely, in his view, to include 3 interpreters, 8 officers and 14 (enlisted or NCOs) soldiers from KAZBAT. He also laid great emphasis upon the nature of their role during the deployment, stating that KAZBAT would specifically execute humanitarian functions.²⁹ KAZBAT was not being sent to Iraq as part of a UN-led operation.

Again, the presence of internal opposition among ordinary Kazakhstanis was evident, and hardly surprising given the international controversy and popular hostility expressed toward the war. Almost 50 percent of citizens in Almaty, questioned in an opinion poll conducted by ComCon-2 Eurasia, opposed the decision to send peacekeepers from Kazakhstan to Iraq. Surprisingly, 61 per cent questioned were in fact unaware of the decision.³⁰ Given the deterioration of the security situation in Iraq, during the post-conflict period, opposition within Kazakhstan has triggered fears for the safety of those servicemen carrying out peacekeeping duties, particularly after the deaths of Italian servicemen in Iraq and Turkey's continued refusal to send its own personnel. Valentin Makalkin, a Member of Parliament in the Majlis, aroused such anxieties two months after the initial deployment: "Given that the situation in Iraq has changed, and taking into consideration the possible 'Vietnamization' of Iraq, to what extent is the presence of our servicemen in Iraq correct, and does it meet the national interests of Kazakhstan?"³¹ Evidently, the government of Kazakhstan has judged that the presence of their peacekeepers is in the national interests, but many officials will recognize the dangers and potential political costs of any failure in the operation.

Notwithstanding the evident reservations of the populace, a political decision was taken to deploy peacekeepers to Iraq, regardless of these concerns. KAZBAT would soon be practically tested in a hostile and volatile post-conflict environment that witnessed near daily insurgent attacks on U.S. and coalition forces. However, it should be observed that the Kazakhstani government had deviated from its earlier formula. Though it adhered rigidly to the humanitarian nature of its operations in Iraq, as previously stated, there was no involvement with the U.N, and the deployment was not without its own unique risks. It shows that democracy works and the government cares about people's opinion. But in Astana, the calculation had been made; weighing and carefully evaluating the potential benefits the risks were not per-

²⁸ "Kazakhstani President Appealed to the Parliament to Send Kazakhstani Peacekeepers to Iraq," *Kazinform*, 30 May, 2003.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ See: "Nearly Half of Almaty Inhabitants Against Kazakhstani Peacekeepers' Departure to Iraq," *Kazinform*, 1 July, 2003.

³¹ "Kazakhstani MP Queries Presence of Peacekeepers in Iraq," *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, Almaty, 20 November, 2003.

ceived as too great. It was indeed a bold step: for the first time in the short history of the former Soviet republics, a peacekeeping unit was being deployed beyond the region in support of ongoing stabilization and humanitarian operations. Kazakhstan was the first in the region to do so.

The preparations and planning to carry this off successfully necessarily required great skill and care. On the basis of the smooth transfer of these soldiers to Iraq in August 2003, and their performance since that time, which remains in progress at the time of writing, it will be shown that KAZBAT has emerged as an effective peacekeeping battalion whose strengths, rather than weaknesses, demand continued international assistance in order to achieve fully the goal of NATO interoperability.

Throughout the summer of 2003 preparations were made and implemented aimed at minimizing the problems that could arise in transferring elements of the battalion from Kazakhstan to Iraq. Its most intensive period fell in July as the Kazakhstani MOD selected the individuals from KAZBAT for the deployment. After initially beginning that process with a larger group, finally the selection of 27 personnel was completed. The pre-deployment training was minimal and appeared to reflect how far the battalion has progressed in the comparatively short time since its foundation in 2000.³²

The actual deployment of 27 personnel from KAZBAT led by Lieutenant-Colonel Kairat Smagulov, which began on 19 August, 2003 with the first group of 14 servicemen departing for the Middle East, saw them located in the eastern part of Iraq, operating near Baghdad.³³ The second group of servicemen departed on 20 August, and assembled in Kuwait for pre-deployment briefings and training. According to *Komsomolskaya Pravda Kazakhstan*, U.S. military personnel spent around one week briefing KAZBAT on bomb disposal, and provided details of the possible locations of unexploded U.S. ordnance. On 5 September, 2003, after comparatively short period, KAZBAT started carrying out its mission.³⁴ They were tasked with humanitarian duties, including mine clearance and water purification, as part of the international division placed under Polish command.

**Polish-Led Multinational Peacekeeping Division,
Center South Zone, Iraq**

Country	Size of Force
Poland	2,300
Ukraine	1,800
Spain	1,300
Philippines	175
Albania	100
Latvia	145
FYROM	28
Kazakhstan	27
Estonia	Unknown

S o u r c e: The Military Balance, 2003-2004, IISS, Oxford, 2003, pp. 101, 111.

³² Author's interviews with western military officers, October 2003.

³³ See: "Kazakhstani Military Engineers Remove 7,500 Explosive Devices in Iraq," *News Bulletin of the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the U.S.A. and Canada* [www.kazakhembus.com], 19 September, 2003.

³⁴ See: "Kazakhstani Defence Minister Sees Off Peacekeepers to Iraq," *Khabar TV*, Almaty, BBC Monitoring Service, 1300 GMT, 19 August, 2003; "Kazakhstan Sends Second Group of Peacekeepers to Iraq," *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, 20 August, 2003; "Kazakhstani Peacekeepers in Kuwait to Learn How to Defuse U.S. Bombs in Iraq," *Komsomol'skaia pravda Kazakhstana*, Almaty, BBC Monitoring Service, 20 August, 2003.

The deployment of multinational peacekeeping forces to Iraq was divided into two zones. The Lower South Zone under UK command, with its operational HQ at Basra, included forces from Italy (responsible for Dhi Qar Province), Netherlands (responsible for Al-Muthanna Province), Denmark, Lithuania, Romania, Czech Republic, Norway, Portugal and New Zealand. The Center-South Zone, under Polish command, with its HQ at Al Hillah, began deploying to Iraq in mid-2003 replacing the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF). In addition to the forces delineated in the above table, the Polish-led division also included forces from Bulgaria, Honduras, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Fiji and Thailand.³⁵ KAZBAT works in close cooperation with the peacekeepers from Ukraine, serving as an important link in liaising with the Divisional command.

Conditions are good for the elements of KAZBAT serving in Iraq. The 27 strong group of peacekeepers lives in a field tent for 80 people, equipped with ten air conditioning units. Plans are underway to receive a building for barracks and staff. Medical treatment is offered at a very high standard and the question of supplies is resolved by the American provision of all necessary foodstuffs and drinks for the members of KAZBAT.³⁶

It is too early to thoroughly assess the success of the deployment to Iraq, which is in any case intended to showcase the battalion. Nonetheless, there are several points that can safely be asserted based on the early stages of the operation. KAZBAT has conducted itself in a professional manner, proving itself capable of carrying out its designated tasks of water purification and military engineering activities, including 400,000 explosives have been cleared by the contingent. Four months into the first six-month deployment, sustaining no fatalities or injuries, KAZBAT had also established good relations with locals, making clear the message that they were deployed in the country for peaceful reasons, explaining to locals that they arrived in Iraq not to fight but to help. Its success can be attested to in gaining sufficient trust amongst locals to receive information on the location of ordnance left over from the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). Within five days of the operation commencing in September 2003, the engineers and sappers had successfully detected and destroyed 100 light and anti-tank mines, 10 air-to-ground missiles, and more than 1,000 artillery shells. KAZBAT has also secured a local airfield and provided for the security of its own personnel. It has also efficiently carried out water extraction tasks. The total cost of the deployment is expected to reach \$98,000 in the first six months.³⁷

A more exacting assessment was carried out by the Kazakhstani MOD in October 2003, sending an inspection group to the country between 16-21 October, tasked with examining the progress of KAZBAT's work and preparing recommendations for the later rotation of the peacekeepers. Colonel Adylbek Aldabergenov, Deputy Commander of the airmobile forces, headed the commission. It had to analyze the level of combat readiness of KAZBAT, assess the condition of its equipment, financial arrangements, and familiarize themselves with living conditions and interoperability with the other forces.³⁸ The lessons learned will be acted on during the operation and in future rotations. Personnel were carefully selected for the first rotation, carried out in February 2004 (all volunteers), making improvements or any necessary adjustments to the original deployment plans. KAZBAT would also benefit from entering into multilateral agreements through PFP, or bilaterally, with coalition forces serving in Iraq, such as U.S. or U.K. units, resulting in the placement of senior officers from the battalion with their American and British counterparts; in this case, these officers would return to Kazakhstan with a greater and richer experience of the operational environment and working, albeit in a "placement" or observer role, with Western military forces.

³⁵ See: *The Military Balance, 2003-2004*, pp. 101, 111.

³⁶ See: "Kazakhstani Peacekeepers Destroy Over 300,000 Rounds of Ammunition in Iraq," *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, Almaty, 1208 GMT, 22 October, 2003.

³⁷ See: "Kazakhstan Sending Peacekeepers to Iraq," *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, Almaty, BBC Monitoring Service, 0630 GMT, 19 August, 2003; "Kazakhstani Peacekeepers Destroy Munitions in Iraq," *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, Almaty, 10 September 2003; "Kazakhstani Peacekeepers on Good Terms with Locals—Defense Minister," *Kazakhstan Today News Agency*, 26 September, 2003; "Kazakhstani Peacekeepers Neutralize 100,000 Rounds of Ammo' Mines in Iraq," *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, Almaty, 11 October, 2003.

³⁸ See: "Kazakhstani Peacekeepers Destroy Over 300,000 Rounds of Ammunition in Iraq."

The political importance of Kazakhstan's sending its peacekeepers to Iraq was underscored by Lord Robertson, NATO Secretary-General: "I would like to commend Kazakhstan, its president and its parliament for the nation's support for the peacekeeping mission in Iraq. We live in a dangerous world, and I am sure the growing relations between Kazakhstan and NATO will help stabilize the situation in the world."³⁹ During Lord Robertson's visit to the Kazakhstan in July 2003, publicizing once more the strategic importance of the region to the Alliance, he encouraged Astana to build on the achievement of becoming a member of PARP in order that it might contribute to international PK efforts.⁴⁰

Regional Cooperation in Peacekeeping: Future Challenges

Since the PK experiment in the 1990s, through CENTRASBAT, had limited success in inspiring real regional security cooperation, it is essential that NATO planners seize the opportunity presented in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks and the new security environment to once again return to the question of how best to stimulate PK activities and capabilities in Central Asia. If an initiative can be crafted from within the Alliance, properly supported by member states, there is every reason to believe that the regional governments would take seriously any genuine attempt to formulate a concept that brings together the national PK elements within one forum, for further development.

It is suggested, therefore, that the lessons of CENTRASBAT's failings be learned and that a new PK unit be created in Central Asia, combat capable and designed, trained and equipped in accordance with NATO standards. In the context of KAZBAT's recent advances, and taking into account the improving nature of training facilities, Kazakhstan would make an ideal location for such a unit. Allowing the unit to be adequately supported, first and foremost through prioritizing ELT, this can be carried out by assisting in the MOD Linguistic Center (LC). The HQ of LC is located in Almaty. As matter of fact, small teams from KAZBAT are sent to Almaty to receive language training. Besides Kapchagai, the LC has appendixes in Astana (capital city), Shchuchinsk (Military Academy and NCO academy), Aktau (Western regional command), Karaganda (for Eastern and Central regional command's units). The vision of a new Central Asia PK unit could be realized only through the assistance of NATO member states; perhaps led by the U.S. and U.K. with further support from France, Germany, Turkey. New NATO member states, such as Poland whose experience in leading the PK division in Iraq will be important to draw upon, can play an active and crucial role in sharing PK experience and expertise with NATO partners in the region. Soldiers from this unit could be sent to military academies in China, Russia, Turkey, U.S.A. and the UK as well as within Central Asia itself.

Such an initiative would have to encapsulate the following vital components: provision of training, equipment and furthering operational experience for those serving in the unit.

Central Asian Peacekeeping and Stabilization Unit	
Objective:	Formation of a Central Asian PK unit, enhancing regional security cooperation.
Participants:	Components from the PK forces of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.
Command:	U.N.

³⁹ "Kazakhstan and the War Against Terrorism," *The Caspian Information Center* [<http://www.caspianinfo.org/story.php?id=5>].

⁴⁰ See: "NATO and Kazakhstan: Meeting 21st Century Challenges Together," Speech by NATO Secretary-General Lord Robertson, Almaty, 10 July, 2003 [www.nato.int/docu/speech/2003/s0370710a.htm].

Initiating such proposals, unlike the origin of CENTRASBAT, must come from the West. NATO has prioritized its partnership with the region since the tragic events of 11 September 2001, yet the political will expressed in the Prague summit in November 2002, needs detail and careful refinement. Forming a new regional peacekeeping unit, utilizing the strengths of KAZBAT, Kazakhstani facilities and expertise, will be one mechanism through which the Alliance can demonstrate its vigorous engagement activities and commitment to promoting security. Furthermore, such a unit would assist in realizing the goal of regional security cooperation. It will require support, lacking in the case of CENTRASBAT, from NATO member states keen to promote regional security, involving practical assistance and sharing of knowledge and expertise.

Training shortfalls represented a major stumbling block to CENTRASBAT's effective participation in U.N. or NATO sponsored PKO. The identified problems cannot be effectively redressed with one, narrowly focused assistance program; rather the program that is developed and implemented must train the current PK cohort to an established standard, put in place the mechanisms necessary to support the maintenance of trained skills or even to expand upon them, and to create an indigenous training organization, program and a qualified cadre of instructors to sustain the program over the long-term. The intent is to concentrate external training assistance on both providing direct instruction and training, as well as planning, programming, and management assistance to the unit through deployed training teams, improving the organization and structure of the indigenous training program, and, in parallel, using the established ELT and PK training programs as a vehicle for creating on a long-term basis the planning and training staff and unit leaders that will sustain the PK unit.

The first step should be implementation of ELT program to support the unit and the Armed Forces of its member states. The next steps needed are: development of an indigenous PK training cadre; refinement of a master training plan to place a more balanced emphasis on PK skills; and to outline a coherent training support program to do this.⁴¹

A new Central Asian PK unit, with genuine support from the Alliance, could be deployed to support ISAF in Afghanistan or in post-conflict Iraq. It could equally be invaluable as a support tool for the Afghan-Tajik border, in certain circumstances, showing willingness to operate beyond the region as well as within it.

The task of enhancing the PK capabilities of Kazakhstan's armed forces, through KAZBAT, and the early engagement activities exemplified by CENTRASBAT reminds the international community of the scale of the task in achieving long-term success in these endeavors. But the new security environment, which has resulted from the Global War Against Terrorism, increasing the strategic importance of the Central Asian region, has supplied a window of opportunity to realize such goals. It will be the task of NATO's political and military leadership to work out in detail practical mechanism for developing the Alliance's relationship and partnership with the region, acting upon the basis of common interests and the search for a closer security arrangement with a once forgotten, or underestimated region. Kazakhstan is exploring ways in which KAZBAT may be expanded and also wants its airmobile forces to develop PK capabilities. Enhanced PK capabilities in a volatile part of the world and encouraging regional security cooperation demand close attention be paid to finding and agreeing a way forward. Kazakhstan's willingness to participate in PKO in Iraq and its continued evolving relationship with the West, places the responsibility for assisting in the formation and improvement of Kazakhstan's PK capabilities and fostering regional cooperation—at least in part—with the West.

⁴¹ Author's interviews with western military officers concerning the shortcomings of CENTRASBAT, June/July 2003.