



Beyond Afghanistan NATO's partnership with Central Asia and South Caucasus: A tangled partnership?

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the Alliance's partnership policy has changed in Central Asia and South Caucasus since the 1990s and aims to clarify to what extent NATO's new partnership policy can affect its relations with these countries. NATO–Russian relations and the Afghanistan operation are evaluated as the main drivers of this process. The target date of the withdrawal of the ISAF combat mission in December 2014, set at the Lisbon Summit 2010, as well as the shifting of the focus of long-term US foreign policy to the Asia-Pacific region and the US aim of balancing China's influence in this region increase the necessity for the Alliance to redefine its future policy towards Central Asia and South Caucasus. The article claims these developments have caused the need to treat Russia more as a partner than a potential competitor in constituting the policy towards Central Asia and South Caucasus. Furthermore the article claims there is no possibility for new Alliance expansion in this part of the world in the short to medium term.

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1. Introduction

NATO's partnership policy has been one of the main components of the Alliance's response to the post-Cold War era, as well as a limited bond with the countries in Central Asia and South Caucasus, both strategically important regions in Eurasia. Partnership policy initially constituted an essentially political means of integrating and

democratizing Europe. Partnership for Peace (PfP), which is an important component of this policy, was considered as an initiative on the way to NATO membership particularly in Eastern and Central Europe. However it hasn't had that kind of influence in Central Asia and South Caucasus. This fact partly clarifies why concrete cooperation remains limited, although all five Central Asian Republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) and three South Caucasus countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) take part in PfP. Because of the low profile of this policy in this part of the world, it is clear that the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan largely defines NATO relations with these countries instead. Therefore the transfer of full security responsibility from the ISAF to the Afghan National Security Forces by the end of 2014 increases the necessity for the Alliance to define its future policy towards Central Asia and South Caucasus.

Adopted at the Lisbon Summit, NATO's New Strategic Concept emphasizes the necessity of maintaining

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cooperation with countries and organizations beyond the borders so as to ensure the security of NATO members, as well as identifies “cooperative security” as one of NATO’s three essential core tasks. Partnership falls under this task. After the Lisbon decisions, allied foreign ministers endorsed a new partnership policy at their meeting in Berlin on 15th April 2011. As such NATO’s partnership policy has become one of the most important tasks of the Alliance, at least in terms of the official discourse. Allies also restated their goal of achieving cooperative security through partnership during NATO’s Chicago Summit in May in 2012. Given this increasing emphasis on partnership, a question arises as to its for what the partnership with the countries in Central Asia and South Caucasus will be.

This article examines the evolving place of the NATO in Central Asia and South Caucasus, giving an overview of the partnership activities of the countries in the region. The article aims to clarify how the Alliance’s partnership policy has changed in this region since the 1990s as well as how NATO’s new partnership policy will affect the relations with these countries. The US interests and NATO–Russian relations are evaluated as the main drivers of this process. The shifting the focus of long-term US foreign policy to the Asia-Pacific region and the US aim of balancing China’s influence has caused the need to treat Russia more as a partner than a potential competitor in constituting the policy towards Central Asia and South Caucasus. Given these developments the article also claims there is no possibility for new Alliance expansion in this part of the world in the short to medium term.

2. NATO’s presence in Central Asia and South Caucasus

There are several factors which make Central Asia and South Caucasus vital regions on the stage of world politics. Firstly, this part of the world is a powerhouse of energy resources, such as oil and natural gas. Secondly, the geopolitical location of these areas hosts the “New Silk Road”, an important trade route between China and Europe and sits on the doorstep of China and Russia. Thirdly, Afghanistan can also be regarded as a source of possible threats to neighbouring countries and other countries of the world because of its illegal drug production and trafficking, and terrorism.¹ All these and other factors have rendered the region important for the geopolitical interests of the major and regional powers and international organizations and institutions. We can say easily that these factors are exactly the same as and valid for NATO.

In the post-Cold War era, NATO’s policy towards Central Asia and South Caucasus can be examined in three periods. The first period is between 1991 and 2001, the second is between 2001 and 2010 and the third begins after the adoption of NATO’s New Strategic Concept in 2010. The Afghanistan operation is the main determinant in the forming of these periods. With the beginning of the Afghanistan operation, NATO increased its political and

military presence in the region. NATO’s involvement can be explained through its willingness to prevent any likely threat emanating from the region and to keep the region’s supply routes to Afghanistan open.

In 2003, NATO formally took over command of the ISAF in Afghanistan. Although NATO’s ISAF mission is not the first time the allies have debated the responsibilities they have to each other beyond the territorial defence of their own territories, this mission displayed very openly disagreements amongst allies over this issue. Furthermore, the ISAF initially operated in the relative safety of the capital and its environs, but then the force steadily expanded its responsibility and reached throughout Afghanistan, including into the dangerous southern part of the country. This development caused a burden sharing problem amongst allies.² The Afghanistan operation exposed the lack of consensus on the description of common threat perception among Allies. Therefore these disagreements increased the significance of the partners’ contribution to the ISAF mission. Particularly, the contribution from the partner countries in Central Asia and South Caucasus has been enormously important due to their geographical locations. The geography of Afghanistan has prompted NATO to devote greater attention to these countries, all of which have provided various forms of assistance that are critical to NATO’s ability to operate in Afghanistan: military bases, transit routes, and cooperation on border security. Ties established with these countries through the partnership policy facilitated NATO’s insertion and presence in the region.

There are several reasons for why the third period starts with the New Strategic Concept which is the third and the last strategic concept that had been adopted since the end of the Cold War. The New Strategic Concept was published in a period when the effects of 2008 global financial crisis were clearly felt in the budgets of NATO countries and when the US defined its strategic priorities in Asia Pacific Region. In this new period starting after 2010, NATO decided to pull out from Afghanistan and to renew partnership policy which defines the structure of the relations of the Alliance with the countries in the region. These developments are elements which will shape NATO’s policy for this region.

While forming NATO’s policies for this region, the importance of the need to provide political and logistical support to the ISAF and the need to maintain the balance in NATO–Russia relations was recognized. During these periods NATO’s partnership policy and its tools have played a facilitating role in ensuring ties between NATO and the countries in the region. Before detailing NATO’s presence in Central Asia and South Caucasus, there are a few general points that can be made regarding the relations between NATO and Russia. The most important reason for the

¹ Mirzokhid Rakhimov, “Internal and External Dynamics of Regional Cooperation in Central Asia”, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol.1, No.1, 2010, p. 96.

² For more information about the problems regarding Afghanistan operation among the allies, see. Benjamin Schreier, “The Evolution of NATO’s Strategy in Afghanistan”, Hakan Edström and Dennis Gyllensporre (eds.), *Pursuing Strategy: NATO Operations from the Gulf War to Gaddafi*, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2012, pp. 143–147; Mark Webber, “NATO: The United States, Transformation and The War in Afghanistan”, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 11, No.1, 2009, pp. 49–50.

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