

Regional Projections of NATO's Global Outreach: Lessons from Central Asia

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The article analyses the evolving partnership between Central Asian countries and NATO, with particular focus on their involvement in Afghanistan in partnership with NATO. The author suggests that future partnerships between Central Asian nations and NATO may prove challenging. The article argues that throughout the ISAF operation in Afghanistan, Central Asian countries have remained consumers and relatively passive spectators. On one hand, through the overall network of PfP and NDN-related activities, Central Asian states have obtained important- and indeed quite successful - experiences in terms of interacting with the once alien and hostile North Atlantic Alliance. The paper concludes that the NATO-Central Asia partnership can become a marker of the post-Cold War 'reboot' of the international security system.



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NATO's post-Cold War eastward enlargement and partnerships with countries outside the Alliance's zone of responsibility has been developed since 1994. The new stage of collaboration with the countries constituting the so-called coalition of the willing – the policy designed in the last summits of the Alliance – demonstrates NATO's unprecedented, steady and resolute motion towards what has been called 'global outreach'.

It can sound so simple: 'global outreach'. But what does it mean in terms of ideas, policies (or actions) and implications? Can we envisage the transformation of NATO into a global organization like the UN? Can it become a pillar of the global security architecture?

Any evaluation of the Alliance's future role should consider its previous experience, especially in relation to its operation in Afghanistan and the partnerships with Central Asian states, which have provided a unique lesson.

In the first two decades after the end of the Cold War, NATO looked predominantly at the east, toward Central and Eastern Europe, Ukraine and Russia. Today it is being drawn increasingly south to the Mediterranean, Middle East and Gulf for a simple reason—this is where many of the new challenges are located. If NATO wants to avoid strategic irrelevance, it needs to give increasing attention to the threats from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and develop a "Southern Strategy."¹

At the same time, within the Alliance, strategic discussions on future outreach activities envisage, a pivot towards the Asia-Pacific area, following the U.S. policy shift. But unlike the previous outreach initiatives in which NATO has had missions in the field, its gradual Asia-Pacific power projection looks like as an overextension, given lessons drawn from the last operation in South Asia.

¹ F. Stephen Larrabee and Peter A. Wilson, *NATO Needs a Southern Strategy*, The National Interest, January 27, 2014, available at <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/nato-needs-southern-strategy-9769>

Afghanistan-2014: the End or Beginning of History?

Former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton formally designated Afghanistan a "major non-NATO ally," setting the stage for tighter military cooperation even as international troops are on a path to withdraw from the war-torn country by the end of 2014. The list of major non-NATO allies includes Argentina, Australia, Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand. Notably, these countries are eligible for priority delivery of military hardware and can get US government help to buy arms and equipment.²

However, this non-NATO ally of the United States – Afghanistan, more precisely former President Karzai – demonstrated reluctance to sign a security agreement with the U.S., creating significant uncertainty. But while Karzai initiated intrigue and games before the elections, the new presidential candidates in the April 2014 elections made no secret of their desire to continue strategic cooperation with the U.S. and NATO. On the other hand, NATO announced the 'assist-train-advise' (ATA) mission under the name "Resolute Support" in Afghanistan after withdrawal of the ISAF forces by the end of 2014. NATO's role in the region is predominantly shaped by two strategic undertakings – designing the ATA mission and the withdrawal process.

Due to the functioning of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), NATO is gaining a unique "geographical experience" via the complex utilization of land, rail, sea and airways in the vast Euro-Asian space, with which it was unfamiliar prior to the ISAF operation in Afghanistan. This led NATO, as noted by NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow, to "set up a whole network of redundant routes so that if one failed, others would be able to easily fill in". After all, NATO's longer-term objective should be "to bring regional stakeholders to the understanding that security can be more than a zero sum game".³ As Heidi Reisinger rightly argues, "ISAF

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² Hillary Clinton visits Kabul and declares Afghanistan a 'major ally', The Telegraph, 7 July 2012, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/9383322/Hillary-Clinton-visits-Kabul-and-declares-Afghanistan-a-major-ally.html>

³ Rynning, S. "After Combat, the Perils of Partnership: NATO and Afghanistan beyond 2014", in NATO Defense College *Research Paper*, No. 80, July 2012, p.7, see: <http://www.ndc.nato.int/>

redeployment is both a challenge and a chance to create efficient collaboration patterns in military logistics that will impact NATO operations far beyond 2014. The way NATO manages this challenge will significantly impact on the political future of the Alliance internally, and also the way it is seen from the outside.⁷⁴ So how is it really seen in Central Asia?

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With NATO now scaling down and transforming its presence in Afghanistan, some members of the Alliance may have hoped that the task would be finished, and the threat eradicated. However, Iraq presents the obvious counter example here. Even if the mission is completed successfully, this does not mean that Afghanistan and the broader region are protected from future threats and attacks. As long as the Taliban and other opposition groups are not simply opponents of the government but *armed and actively fighting*, they are likely to continue fighting, even in the absence of international forces, since that is what

they were doing long before the U.S. and NATO's entered Afghanistan. This means that in strategic terms, NATO should admit the likelihood of returning to this part of the world for combat operations if necessary, not only for the ATA mission. NATO should not consider its outreach endeavor as simply a 'come and go' adventure but one of investing in partnership capital.

One of the strong lessons that NATO has hopefully taken on board following its experiences in Afghanistan and Central Asia is that the overall "project" of surge-operation-withdrawal should be complemented with some form of capitalizing on the assets gained during the operation, in order to reinforce established partnership patterns and leave the door open for future involvement. The reason for the Alliance's long-term or even permanent presence in the area is that ISAF is leaving Afghanistan in an unstable condition and without having eradicated sources of international and regional threats, and without defeating the enemy. Those threats will not fade with ISAF's withdrawal.

The lessons for Central Asian nations, in turn, may be even more challenging. Until now, throughout the ISAF operation, they

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4 Reisinger, H. "Not only "Container spotting" – NATO's Redeployment from Landlocked Afghanistan", in Andris Spruds and Diana Potjomkina, eds., Northern Distribution Network: Redefining Partnerships within NATO and Beyond. (Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2013), p. 33.

have remained consumers and relatively passive spectators. On the one hand, the overall PFP and NDN-related activities have given Central Asians very important and quite successful experiences of interactions with the once alien and hostile North Atlantic Alliance. The NATO Central Asia partnership became a marker of the post-Cold War rebooting of the international security system. On the other hand, Kazakhstan's, Kyrgyzstan's, Tajikistan's, Turkmenistan's and Uzbekistan's cooperation with NATO, especially regarding Afghanistan, has been a relatively commercial matter.⁵

Nowadays, NATO experts and officials are more preoccupied with the modality of withdrawal or redeployment from Afghanistan. They are engaged in discussions of NDN, alternative routes, commercial agreements with transit countries, and so on. But in the course of such discussions, one simple but important fact is often overlooked: the enemy has not been defeated, and therefore retains combat potential that it will most likely apply locally, regionally and internationally. Although the Taliban and other insurgent and terrorist groups are unlikely to seize power again immediately after NATO's withdrawal, these groups will not cease their activity. The NATO presence in Afghanistan has been unique. When foreign troops were there, many Afghans accused them of targeting civilians, but when these troops are set to withdraw, Afghans seem to request their extended presence.

Based on the parameters of Heidi Reisinger's argument that "if you can redeploy from Afghanistan you can redeploy from everywhere,"⁶ one could argue that if you can stay in Afghanistan you can stay everywhere.

Hiring NATO: Fire Brigade or World Police?

Before leaving office, former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen stated that NATO must stand ready to deter, and defend against, any threat. The Alliance is shifting "from op-

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5 Tolipov F. "NATO-Uzbekistan-NDN: Mercenary Deal or Strategic Cooperation?" in Andris Spruds and Diana Potjomkina, eds., Northern Distribution Network: Redefining Partnerships within NATO and Beyond. (Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2013), p.115-134.

6 Ibid, p.33.

erational engagement to operational readiness, from campaign to contingency, and from deployed NATO to prepared NATO.”⁷

In the wake of the forces’ withdrawal from Afghanistan, the discussions are gaining new impetus regarding the Alliance’s new role in Afghanistan, a role that might be useful in other conflict regions. Some experts perceive NATO as a ‘fire brigade’, meaning that its forces might control the situation in Afghanistan without being physically present after 2014. However, this model requires that NATO retains some regional infrastructure components to ensure the Alliance’s forces can react quickly to any crisis situation.⁸

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Under the ‘fire brigade’ concept, the U.S. and NATO are likely to seek base opportunities in the neighboring countries, such as Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. However, given Russia’s inevitable opposition to the prospect of NATO deployment in these countries, some diversifications of this scenario are being discussed, suggesting that Turkey, Romania, the UAE and Qatar may be considered for bases. In this case, certain logistical and technical problems may arise, given the relative distance of these territories from Afghanistan. Therefore, some argue that the U.S. and NATO may look to India as a strategic location for monitoring Afghanistan.⁹

The realization of the ‘fire brigade’ concept would set a unique precedent for future operations and the power projection of this ‘mobile’ organization, the efficiency of which will increasingly depend on partnerships, collaborations, temporary or permanent deployments, communications, agreements, and so on. NATO will need to create favorable conditions - both political and economic - for delivering its services. From this perspective, possible NATO-India collaboration could have far-reaching implications.

7 “NATO after ISAF – Staying Successful Together”. Remarks by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen at the Munich Security Conference on 02.02.2013. http://www.nato.int/cps/en/nato-live/opinions_94321.htm

8 “Вывод сил США и НАТО из Афганистана может привести к появлению американских военных баз в Индии”, 1 September 2013, available at <http://afghanistan.ru/doc/63716.html>

9 Ibid.

There is also a view of NATO as a ‘world policeman’. According to this concept, due to its initial status as a ‘collective security organization’, NATO will need pivots in as many areas as possible. A pivot, to my mind, entails, *inter alia*, a somewhat sustainable presence in a certain area. As argued above, Afghanistan stands testament to the need NATO’s extended presence in Central Asia.

In June 2012, a NATO Liaison Office was opened in Tashkent, capital of Uzbekistan. Its mission comprises monitoring the functioning of the NDN; liaising with all Central Asian states; developing political interaction with Uzbekistan; and public diplomacy.

From this analysis, one can infer the dual perspective on the security services that NATO is likely to provide in the future: the “fire brigade” or the “world policeman”. The former implies that the Alliance will act as a firefighter and will be mobilized in case of emergency. The second option envisages systematic engagement with old and new partners, especially with those who have been part of the coalition of the willing during specific operations.

NATO-CSTO Engagement

Since 1991, Central Asia has remained in the international focus not only due to its huge energy reserves but also its proximity to one of the epicenters of international and regional security threats and the unprecedented geopolitical transformation. In the emerging new global international security architecture Central Asia has found itself straddling the Euro-Asian and Euro-Atlantic area.¹⁰ This prompted the emergence of the so-called “market of security services” by various security providers in this part of the world. One of them is the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which has six members: Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan had was a member since 1992 until 1999 and from 2006 until December 2012.

While this is the only collective security organization in the post-Soviet Eurasian space, many describe it as a weak structure incapable to act as a real military bloc. The CSTO has faced a

10 Tolipov F. “Central Asia between the Euro-Atlantic and Euro-Asia: Security Services Market in the Region”, in

serious conceptual, geopolitical and functional problem since its inception.¹¹ Having been designed as a ‘security umbrella’ for the whole post-Soviet Euro-Asian space, its zone of responsibility only covers part of it and this quasi-Alliance remains relatively dysfunctional not so much militarily as politically. Its military power is fairly well-suited to its members’ needs but its political/geopolitical identity (or foundation) is not yet well-shaped.

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When the security environment deteriorated in the Caucasus or in Central Asia, the CSTO could not project its collective power. Russia still perceives the Caucasus as within its specifically national sphere of influence, and in Central Asia, the CSTO did not have the appropriate mandate.

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At the same time, despite its relative dysfunctionality, the CSTO as a concept or as an idea needs more precise elaboration. After the dissolution of the former Soviet superpower, the whole former Soviet geographic zone was left without a single security system and for the first time became exposed to external influence in terms of both security challenges and security services. In addition, among the providers in the Central Asian “market of security services”, besides the CSTO, were NATO, OSCE, UN agencies as well as the great powers such as the U.S., the EU, the Russia, the China, Japan, India and others. The North Atlantic Alliance was more prominent in terms of assisting the countries of the region in assuring their security. But none of them has the ambition or intention to take full responsibility for the security of the entire region, should the countries of this region so wish; only CSTO is willing. Central Asia clearly needs some sort of sustainable collective security system, not simply security services from a single provider.

¹¹ See, for instance: Пушков А. Россия способна быть балансирующей силой в международных делах. – Индекс безопасности, № 3, Том 19, 2013, С. 20-22. See also: Tolipov F. “CSTO: Collective security or collective confusion?”, in *Central Asia and Caucasus Institute Analyst*, 09/01/2009, www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5168; and Tolipov F. “Uzbekistan without the CSTO”, in 02/20/2013 issue of the CACI Analyst, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5929>.

From this perspective, CSTO - always available as a collective security organization but a weak actor – and NATO - not always available but a powerful actor – might find a framework for effective, at least informal, interaction and collaboration in dealing with the security challenges and security needs in the former Soviet space. A NATO-CSTO Cooperation Framework (NCCF), in contrast to the NATO-Russia Council, might serve as a platform to represent and articulate the security needs and interests of Central Asian countries and CSTO members. NATO officials proudly and rightly state that NATO is the most, if not the only successful security organization in the world. Interestingly, CSTO can be portrayed as a second most successful security organization in the world, however surprising this statement may sound. There are three reasons for this perception: first, there are no other established collective security treaty organizations dealing with actual threats; second, CSTO covers a vast geographic space – the majority of the former Soviet territory; third, CSTO’s zone of responsibility is situated in proximity to the epicenter of international security threats (namely Afghanistan and the Middle East).

By and large, production and re-production of threats spreading from Afghanistan and the incomplete nature of NATO’s mission there have yielded a unique international situation, whereby Euro-Atlantic (NATO) and Euro-Asian (CSTO) collective security actors could create frameworks of mutual complementarity. There is no illusion that so far the CSTO has remained relatively dysfunctional. However, it has the potential to transform itself into effective collective security system in the vast post-Soviet territory where NATO cannot extend its zone of responsibility, though it can assist CSTO. Some analysts have pointed to the necessity of a dialogue between CSTO and NATO at least due to the significant overlaps between respective the zones of interests and zones of responsibility of these two organizations.¹²

Meanwhile, former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has stated: “we don’t think we need new institutional frameworks, but we, actually NATO very often meet with individual members of CSTO and we cooperate with individual members of CSTO also when it comes to counter-narcotics, which I

¹² Морозов Ю., Макдермотт Р. Перспективы сотрудничества организаций и союзов в целях обеспечения стабильности и безопасности в центрально-азиатском регионе: взгляд из Москвы и Лондона. – Центральная Азия и Кавказ, №6, 2008. – С.37.

think is a very important project. So we cooperate with individual nations. We don't think it's necessary to build new institutional structures between NATO and CSTO as an organization".¹³ In my view, that approach would be the most relevant if the CSTO did not exist. The case-by-case or country-by-country approach to the Central Asian or broader Euro-Asian security architecture, albeit necessary and relatively efficient, should not preclude multilateral attempts to create a collective response mechanism to common security challenges of this vast area.

After all, NATO will have to resolve the friction with the CSTO, given the context of the NATO-CSTO double security umbrella in Central Asia: all five regional states cooperate with NATO and, at the same time, three of them (until recently four – with Uzbekistan) are CSTO members. Given that NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept emphasizes the Alliance's interest in a true strategic partnership with Russia, the NATO-CSTO *rapprochement* will be an indication that the post-Cold War chapter has been closed, heralding the beginning of burden-sharing across new Euro-Asian and Euro-Atlantic security architectures.

Conclusion

The majority of the security threats existing in the Middle East have either origins in or strong connections to the area of South Asia in which Al-Qaida operatives are still hiding. Thus, Afghanistan and its surrounding territories remain the epicenter of international and regional security threats.

NATO risks overextending itself by gravitating towards the Asia-Pacific pivot. But so far there is no major threat to international security emanating from the Asia-Pacific region. The majority of the security threats existing in the Middle East have either origins in or strong connections to the area of South Asia in which Al-Qaida operatives are still hiding. Thus, Afghanistan and its surrounding territories remain the epicenter of international and regional security threats.

It seems the North Atlantic Alliance is shifting from the "fire brigade" to the "world policeman" position. The post-Soviet Eurasian space, especially Central Asia and the Caucasus, represents very specific opportunities in terms innovative experimentation around international security building. By and large, regional projection of the NATO's global outreach is currently being seriously tested in the context of the

ISAF redeployment and the functioning of the NDN.

Within NATO, discussions are ongoing vis-à-vis the so-called 'smart defence' concept, which implies, among other things, pooling and sharing member countries' defense capabilities. An innovative approach to international security requires, to my mind, not only 'smart defense' but also a 'smart security' concept which would mean pooling and sharing security capabilities of all member countries and partner countries. This also means that NATO's global outreach can be effectively constructed by setting and encouraging cooperative security interaction networks, such as the Partnership for Peace Program (1994), Mediterranean Dialogue (1994), Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (2004), NATO-Russia Council, NATO-Georgia Commission, NATO-Ukraine Commission, the proposed NATO-CSTO Cooperation Framework, and so on.

13 Press conference by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen with Moscow-based journalists, 30 March 2012, available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_85625.htm?selectedLocale=en