

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF NATO'S CENTRAL ASIAN STRATEGY: THE ROLE OF KAZAKHSTAN

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Since the 1990s, Central Asia has been steadily moving into the limelight of world geopolitics because of its geostrategic and geoeconomic potential. Political influence, economic interests, access to its considerable resource potential, promotion of religious and national ideas, as well as all aspects of regional security can be described as priorities. The region's geographic location is certainly advantageous: it is found, first, between two influential geopolitical forces and, second, between powerful industrial centers and large consumer markets of Europe and Asia. This means that the region's security and sustainable development are an indispensable condition for realizing all sorts of interests. It goes without saying that it is not easy, for several (including objective) reasons, to set up a system of regional security in Central Asia.

Today the regional security system has several levels; however, it lacks a more or less clear structure, while relative stability is maintained by

bilateral military-political agreements between the Central Asian states and foreign power centers by the efforts of several international organizations. At the same time, the more active involvement of transnational security structures with different ideological platforms is introducing latent geopolitical tension and heating up rivalry among the large geopolitical players. The CSTO, SCO and NATO, all of them dynamically developing military-political alliances, are used as regional rivalry tools.

It should be said that the former two are present in the region for historical and geographic reasons, while the latter has come to stay. In the long-term perspective, therefore, its impact on the regional processes will become inevitable, while the efficiency of regional collective security efforts will largely depend on the format of relations between the Central Asian states and NATO, as well as on cooperation between NATO and Russia, China, the CSTO, and the SCO.

NATO's Contemporary Development Trends

Dynamic developments in the international security sphere have posed the question of the effectiveness of the transnational structures responsible for maintaining security throughout the world by collective efforts. For this reason, for the last fifteen years, NATO has been engaged in systemic re-adjustment of its mechanisms and tools responsible for the security in the Euro-Atlantic zone. For many years now, the Alliance has been identifying and substantiating those missions that go beyond the limits of its functions in strategic documents. It is concentrating on dealing with the new tasks: the antiterrorist struggle; prevention of WMD proliferation; crisis settlement, peacekeeping efforts, and wider dialogs with the countries outside the organization, which envisages readjusting their combat-readiness and maintaining a high level of the armed forces' efficiency. Taken together, this is transforming NATO into a tool that promotes globalization by force; it can also be described as the force-based skeleton of the new world order.¹

NATO is not merely actively involved in the conceptual readjustment of its collective security system and expanding its membership. It is widely using the new strategic ideas in practice. Today NATO is claiming a key role in the international security architecture. To be able to assume this role, however, it must change itself and its strategy. It is gradually enlarging by drawing in new members from Eastern and Central Europe and the Baltic area, which means that it is growing globally. Political science uses the term "NATO's eastward enlargement" to describe the process. The globalization process has taken NATO beyond its traditional responsibility zone, which, on the whole, can be explained by the upsurge of transnational security threats: international terrorism, the failed states, and proliferation of WMD. This explains why traditional "Euro-centrism" is no longer topical.

According to American experts: "With little fanfare—and even less notice—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has gone global."² It should be said in all justice that the so-called globalization of NATO went through a long evolution process caused by a chain of internal crises and contradictions among the members, as well as several armed conflicts in which the Alliance took part (Yugoslavia in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001, and Iraq in 2003). This experience created the worldwide precedent of peace enforcement operations and humanitarian interventions outside the U.N. and endowed NATO with the ability to "project" military force beyond the traditional responsibility zone.

The same authors justify the expansion of NATO's involvement by the post-Cold War political situation: "Today, terrorists born in Riyadh and trained in Kandahar hatch deadly plots in Hamburg to fly airplanes into buildings in New York. Such interconnection means that developments in one place affect the security, prosperity, and well-being of citizens everywhere. NATO has recognized that the best (and at times the only) defense against such remote dangers is to tackle them at their source."³ Russian experts, in turn, have pointed out that the "idea of going beyond the traditional responsibility zone is nothing but a pretext for taking into account the 'global context' when ensuring the members' security."⁴

Today NATO is working on strategic plans aimed at drawing as many countries as possible into Western geopolitics. For this reason, the tactical or even strategic disagreements among the

¹ See: V. Shtol, *Evolutsia NATO v realiakh globalizatsii*, Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Moscow, 2004.

² I. Daalder, J. Goldgeier, "Global NATO," *Foreign Affairs*, No. 5, September/October 2006.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ A.P. Alekseev, "NATO na putiakh transformatsii," *Evropeyskaia bezopasnost: sobytia, otsenki, prognozy*, Issue 9, 2003, p. 2.

Alliance's leaders notwithstanding, NATO is building up its geopolitical presence in many corners of the world.⁵

At the 2006 Riga summit, the NATO countries agreed to intensify their cooperation with partners outside the Alliance (Australia, New Zealand, India, Brazil, and Japan), as well as with the Middle Eastern and Gulf countries. It is "planned to become more deeply involved in cooperation with other international players, such as the U.N., EU, G-8, and the World Bank, as well as NGOs,"⁶ for the sake of a comprehensive approach to the security issues.

The Mediterranean and the Middle East are two of NATO's priorities where it operates on the basis of Istanbul Cooperation Initiative adopted at the 2004 NATO summit in Istanbul. The document allows the interested states of the Greater Middle East to cooperate with the Alliance on the bilateral basis, starting with the individual members of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

In recent years, NATO set up institutional mechanisms of partnership with the Caucasian states that are functioning today. The Alliance is working with the states on an individual and parallel basis. The task is not an easy one: it has to establish cooperation within its programs between Armenia and Azerbaijan and Armenia and Turkey. So far, according to NATO sources, Georgia is the only local state that is actively and consistently moving toward the Alliance. Armenia and Azerbaijan have not yet raised the question of their NATO membership. The Alliance describes its policy in the Southern Caucasus as "spreading stability." Today NATO is just getting used to its role of the region's stabilizing force and is keeping away from the zones of conflict.⁷

In view of Central Asia's special strategic importance for NATO, Brussels is keeping its contacts with the local countries at the highest level; it is prepared to consistently strengthen its presence in the region.⁸ America and the EU are very active in Central Asia: they are busy fortifying the West's military presence there through numerous bilateral and multilateral programs and agreements designed to tie the local states to NATO's policies. Cooperation among the Central Asian states and the North Atlantic Alliance has a fairly long history, but the stronger position of Russia and China achieved through the SCO, as well as forced evacuation of the American forces from Uzbekistan and the recurring contradictions between the United States and Kyrgyzstan, affect the military-political configuration in Central Asia.

NATO's Central Asian Diplomacy

The dynamically globalizing Alliance is obviously seeking tighter control over the region through its integration into NATO's collective security system. It is pursuing several strategic tasks in line with the interests of the West and the United States as its part.

- *First*, the Alliance wants to fortify its position directly in the region to acquire access to its energy resources and gain control over the transportation routes. It also wants to keep Russia and China "irritated" by remaining directly on their borders and in the zone of their natural

⁵ See: M. Laumulin, *Tsentral'naia Azia v mirovoy politologii i mirovoy geopolitike*, Vol. II. *Vneshniaia politika i strategiya SShA na sovremennom etape i Tsentral'naia Azia*, KISI, Almaty, 2006, p. 147.

⁶ Rad van den Akker, M. Rühle, "Putting NATO's Riga Summit into Context," *Russia in Global Politics*, No. 2, April-June 2007.

⁷ See: A. Nursha, "Strategia NATO na Kavkaze i v Afghanistane: sostoianie i perspektivy," 10 July, 2007 [www.kisi.kz].

⁸ See: M. Laumulin, "NATO v Tsentral'noy Azii," *Kontinent*, No. 18 (105), 24 September-7 October, 2003.

interests. This will allow it, at least, to help the West implement its economic projects, while the attention of two large rivals will remain detracted from what NATO is doing globally. It will also retain a certain amount of control in the security sphere; it will oppose transnational threats to the Euro-Atlantic region born in Central Asia and Afghanistan and control the local states' policies. On top of this, Afghanistan plays an important role in the Alliance's military-political strategy as its first military operation under the cooperative conception of security "projection" to the source of threat outside the Euro-Atlantic zone. It was also the first test and the first taste of practical experience in a peacekeeping and anti-crisis operation carried out when the Alliance completed its systemic transformations. Finally, Afghanistan and the situation around it justified NATO's continued presence in Central Asia and its emergence outside the European zone.

- *Second*, the NATO troops in Central Asia serve as a basis for the Alliance's continued control over the neighboring countries that threaten, to a certain extent, the West and its interests. The Alliance is consistently carrying out America's long-term project of geopolitical encirclement of Iran: military strikes on the country have been discussed for several years now. The fact that NATO and the United States managed to move their armed forces to the post-Soviet territory and Afghanistan created a very unfavorable geostrategic configuration around Iran. Indeed, the NATO Central Asian bases and the Caucasian partner-states (Georgia and Azerbaijan) have closed the circle around Iran: in the north there are bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; in the northwest there are two pro-NATO states (Georgia and Azerbaijan); in the west, there are pro-American Israel and Saudi Arabia, Turkey (which is a NATO member), and American contingents in occupied Iraq; in the east, there are bases in Afghanistan and pro-Western Pakistan; and in the south pro-Western Kuwait, UAE, and Oman complete the circle. It looks as if America has carved out the foothold it needs to launch an attack on Iran (with possible NATO involvement). We can even say that Washington, which has been carefully weaving an anti-Iranian geopolitical plot for the last six years (since the counterterrorist operation of 2001), finally gained this foothold.⁹

The Alliance plays a much more important role in Western projects than meets the eye: it is helping to keep Russia, China, and Iran in check in the region, on the one hand, and is exerting ideological pressure on the Western regional partners, on the other. NATO is consistently carrying out very ambitious plans to become the key geopolitical and military operator in Central Asia. It has already laid several cornerstones:

- *first*, it relies on the smoothly functioning mechanisms of the Partnership for Peace and North Atlantic Partnership Council;
- *second*, its relations with the Central Asian countries rest on a legal and normative base;
- *third*, military-political cooperation and military training exercises are a regular feature in the region;
- *fourth*, NATO has its bases in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan (the scene of the NATO-led counterterrorist operation).

NATO is pursuing its regional strategy through distancing and fragmentation, which allows the Alliance to rely on bilateral relations: there is no need to contact the rivaling regional security structures, such as the CSTO and SCO, which limits Russia's and China's range of control over NATO-Central Asia relations.

⁹ See: G. Djemal, "Dvoynoy okhvat," *Profil*, No. 35, 24 September, 2007, pp. 24-25.

At the same time, the bilateral format helps NATO to fragment the region by identifying and supporting the leader with a pro-NATO and pro-Western orientation; in this way, the country is opposed to countries with a pro-Russian foreign policy bias.¹⁰ Bilateral relations simplify the task of putting political and ideological pressure on any of the regional partners.

The Alliance's rapidly progressing politicization inevitably affected its relations with the Central Asian countries. In 2004, NATO set up the post of NATO Secretary-General's Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia; Robert Simmons, the current representative, is a frequent visitor who is always ready for talks and consultations to keep his regular contacts at a government level.

NATO uses bilateral diplomacy to apply the "divide and rule" principle to the best possible effect by exploiting the obvious contradictions and latent rivalry among the local states (Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and partly Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are such rivals, etc.).

All sorts of investment and economic programs carried out by international financial structures in the region make NATO even more attractive to the countries coping with financial and economic problems. This is true of nearly all the Central Asian countries and is especially true of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Financial aid to Uzbekistan was discontinued as soon as the U.S. and NATO pulled out of its territory. Kazakhstan moved away from the programs because of its dynamic economic growth. The Alliance, in turn, supports the Western businesses operating in Central Asia.

NATO is not only pursuing military-strategic interests in the oil- and gas-rich region: it is indirectly promoting the realization of Western energy-related interests. This was recently confirmed by an invitation to set up an "energy Alliance" by endowing NATO with the function of ensuring uninterrupted supply of energy resources to its member states. So far, the project's practical side remains vague.

NATO strategists hope that a system of bilateral relations rooted in all sorts of normative-legal acts that will take care of preferences and obligations will make it possible for the Alliance to narrow down the local countries' foreign policy leeway. There is any number of cooperation programs pushing the Central Asian countries toward greater dependence on NATO (Partnership for Peace, individual partnership plans, the Virtual Silk Road, etc.).¹¹

It stands to reason that the Alliance's military presence and active political involvement have somewhat improved the regional security architecture: on the one hand, it added a certain amount of stability and strengthened the defense capability of some of the local states; on the other, however, it promotes rivalry among the key power centers, thus upsetting the balance and disintegrating the regional security system, the outlines of which have hardly begun to take shape.

NATO's continued presence may split the region into pro- and anti-NATO groups of countries with great powers behind them. This is what is going on today in a format neither America, nor Russia, nor China expected to see: the situation has become vague. This can probably be explained by the fact that none of the states (Uzbekistan being the only exception) has openly joined one of the two military-political camps. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are demonstrating their friendliness toward Russia, China, the CSTO, and SCO, as well as toward the United States, Western Europe, and NATO.

This policy has its specifics: Kazakhstan has officially registered its dual military-political course of cooperation with Russia and NATO; Kyrgyzstan is renting out part of its military infrastructure, while demonstratively moving closer to the CSTO and SCO; and Tajikistan, which remains in Russia's orbit, is moving toward NATO mostly in counterbalance to Uzbekistan, its regional opponent.

¹⁰ See: A. Ustimenko, "Tsentral'naia Azia i NATO: strategicheskie tendentsii razvitiia otnosheniy," *Analytic*, No. 5, 2004, p. 24.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

Turkmenistan is continuing with its policy of equal distancing from all the power centers by switching cooperation to the economic sphere.

It seems that this tactic does not allow the two geopolitical groups to use the mechanisms at their disposal to influence the objects of their strategies. The Central Asian countries, in turn, are acquiring maneuverability by playing on the rivaling interests of the centers of power. It should be said that not all the local states have mastered this skill.

The regional geopolitical structure, which is changing in favor of Russia and China, is forcing NATO either to seek new regional allies or increase its cooperation with old partners. The situation in the region, however, is narrowing down its field of large-scale political moves and is not conducive to any important breakthroughs that might have strengthened its regional position.

It looks as if the bilateral format of relations with the local countries is an important *factor that limits* NATO's opportunity to increase its influence in the region. NATO prefers to stay away from the SCO and CSTO, which means that it cannot control them or influence, even to the slightest degree, the processes underway in these organizations. While the Russian Federation and NATO are cooperating in information exchange, albeit on a minimal scale, consultations, etc., the Alliance has no contacts at all with China, another influential SCO member seeking a stronger position in the region. By entering into cooperation with the CSTO and SCO, NATO would have been able to increase its role in Central Asian geopolitics and find the tools with which to influence the rivals in the future.

The distancing policy undermines the region's stability level and may even create so-called gray zones of instability in the security sectors more or less outside the influence of these organizations. The lower stability level will primarily damage the Alliance's image, which claims to be the guarantor of regional security. The level of confidence in NATO is dropping against the background of the ISAF's barely efficient military operation of the counterterrorist coalition in Afghanistan, the worsening domestic situation under the pressure of extremist forces, and the obvious increase in drug trafficking in the region.

The mounting dissatisfaction with NATO's presence in Central Asia is allowing Russia and China to increase pressure on the West in an effort to drive their geopolitical rival out of the region. Even if NATO preserves its military presence in Afghanistan, it will find it difficult, if not impossible, to carry on with the counterterrorist operation without the Central Asian infrastructure.

To sum up: after more than six years of its military presence in Central Asia, the North Atlantic Alliance failed to tap into the favorable geopolitical situation: it even lost some of its previous ground. Today, NATO has to follow the logic imposed on it by Russia and China, two countries actively (and fairly successfully) building up bilateral and multilateral relations with the Central Asian countries. The latter aware of their potential and interests are fortifying their position: they no longer want to remain targets of the diplomatic efforts of outside forces.

The region has acquired a hierarchy of local countries as far as their economic potential and foreign policy involvement are concerned. For objective reasons, Kazakhstan is at the very top of the pyramid, *first*, because it is the most developed country in the region with a fairly ramified foreign policy; *second*, Russia and China, as well as the United States and the European Union, want closer cooperation with Kazakhstan for different reasons; *third*, because Kazakhstan, an CSTO and SCO member, is developing its Partnership for Peace program with NATO and is an active member of all the regional integration initiatives. It has no conflicts either with its immediate neighbors or with distant countries; its authority and regional leadership are gaining momentum. Kazakhstan extends economic support to its Central Asian neighbors, which makes it a pillar of regional stability. Today we can safely say that continued military-political cooperation in Central Asia largely depends on the position and policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, a fact that Russia, China, and the West should take into account.

Kazakhstan and NATO: Cooperation Dynamics

To fortify their position in the region, Western strategists are seeking deeper and wider cooperation between NATO and Kazakhstan. The latter, in turn, needs closer cooperation with the Alliance to upgrade its defense capability and acquire more levers in the joint struggle against today's threats and challenges. This means that cooperation with NATO gives Kazakhstan the opportunity to become involved in ensuring international security in the first place.

Relations between Kazakhstan and NATO passed through several stages during their onward and logical development. *The first stage began when the Soviet Union ceased to exist and ended in 1994.* The sides identified their priorities, interests, and possible cooperation spheres. It should be said that independence created a vast number of problems in the security sphere that called for an immediate solution. The newly independent state had no army, while its national security services and internal affairs agencies needed urgent reforming.¹² From the very first days of independence, President Nazarbaev was aware that his country's national security largely depended on the level of its interaction with international structures. He knew that the West had launched an active process aimed at building up new systems of international security which relied, in many respects, on NATO's resources and structures. This meant that Kazakhstan should establish constructive relations with this influential structure.

Their first contacts date to the very first days of independence. In December 1991, NATO set up the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) to develop contacts with former WTO members. On 10 March, 1992, Kazakhstan joined the NACC; since that time cooperation has been successfully unfolding within the Statement on Dialog, Partnership, and Cooperation which envisages meetings, seminars, and symposia on economic, defense, ecological, scientific, and many other issues.¹³

We all know that in the early 1990s Kazakhstan attracted the attention of NATO and the West as a whole as a country with the largest nuclear potential. From the very beginning, however, the country's leaders remained firm and absolutely clear: nuclear weapons are a destructive political factor unable to protect those who own them. They add to instability and interfere with good-neighborly relations with nearby states. Thanks to efficient diplomatic action, the country chose the right tone in its relations with NATO. Its well-balanced diplomatic practice allowed the republic not only to acquire security guarantees from the nuclear powers; by abandoning its nuclear arsenal the republic boosted its international prestige. The regular and productive meetings between President Nazarbaev and NATO leaders made it possible to raise the format of bilateral relations to a new, more confidential level.

The second cooperation stage began in 1994 and ended in September 2001. This was a period of the sides' practical cooperation, which extended not only to the military-political sphere, but also to democracy and human rights, civil defense, liquidation of the effects of natural disasters, science and high technology.

In 1994, the Partnership for Peace Program appeared; in May of the same year, Kazakhstan signed its Framework Document to become its 19th participant. It drew up its Presentation Document, which outlined the cooperation priorities: planning and funding national defense; democratic control over the armed forces and training the military. The document was handed to the NATO

¹² See: *Natsional'naya bezopasnost: itogi desiatiletia*, ed. by M. Ashimbaev *et al.*, Elorda Publishers, Astana, 2001, p. 15.

¹³ See: K.K. Tokaev, *Pod stiagom nezavisimosti*, Bilim Publishers, Almaty, 1997.

Secretary-General at the regular meeting of the NACC foreign ministers that took place in December 1994.¹⁴

Kazakh experts are convinced that the Partnership for Peace Program offered Kazakhstan the most rational cooperation format.¹⁵ NATO looks at the Program as a key factor promoting the relations between the Alliance and the Program members and adding vigor to their political and military cooperation. The Program is aimed at planning national defense; establishing democratic control over the armed forces, and training the army for peacekeeping operations. Effective cooperation within the Program considerably widened the field of practical cooperation, which in turn made it possible to launch several important initiatives, including Science for Peace and the Virtual Silk Road.

On 14 June, 2000, the president of Kazakhstan issued a decree that created the Kazakhstani Peacekeeping Battalion (Kazbat) to improve interoperability between the republic's army and NATO. This meant that Kazakhstan joined the ranks of the states that use their contingents for peacekeeping activities under the U.N. or NATO aegis, which naturally required new approaches to many important aspects. It was not enough for the Kazbat to master military skills; it needed good command of other things, including the English language, communication means, command and control systems, and decision-making procedures, as well as an understanding of how knowledge and experience are shared among contemporary armed forces. This means that thanks to cooperation with NATO, the republic's army upgraded its military potential and became involved in international peacekeeping operations.

It should be said that at all times Kazakhstan has been closely following the processes inside NATO and around it. The republic retained its constructive attitude toward NATO's eastward enlargement, mainly because the process could not be reversed. In fact, the process did not threaten Kazakhstan, although it was convinced that the "eastward enlargement" should not upset European stability and should take into account Russia's interests.

The 9/11 events changed forever the nature of international relations, particularly the format of international cooperation in the security sphere. *This ushered in the third stage of NATO-Kazakhstan cooperation, which lasted until early 2006 and was marked by much stronger partner relations.*

In October 2001, the United States and its NATO allies launched a military operation against Afghanistan as the first stage of the global counterterrorist campaign. The terrorist acts in the United States altered North-Atlantic strategic thinking: from that time on the Alliance needed much closer cooperation with its partner states. Kazakhstan offered considerable support to the coalition forces by letting them use its air space and allowing their aircraft to make emergency landings on its airfields. This naturally added a new quality to NATO-Kazakhstan relations. In 2002, Kazakhstan became the first Central Asian state to join NATO's Planning and Review Process. To improve their interoperability and defense activities (two cornerstones of the antiterrorist struggle on the republic's territory), NATO and Kazakhstan conducted military training exercises.¹⁶

The 2002 Prague summit adopted the project of a new NATO very different from the Cold War instrument, as far as its tasks, composition, and potential were concerned. The leaders of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPS) officially confirmed these obligations and agreed on the Partnership Action Plan against Terrorism. By signing the document, the EASP leaders recognized that all the states faced the same security challenges and that they should pool forces to confront them.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ See: E. Kononovich, "Kazakhstan i NATO: dialog partnerov," *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, 29 June, 2004.

¹⁶ Based on the materials of the Khabar information agency, available at [www.khabar.kz].

As for Kazakhstan as a NATO ally, the document extends its possibilities and serves as a mechanism for its involvement in the Alliance's counterterrorist struggle. Its contribution to the process will correspond to its international obligations in this sphere with due account of the republic's policy in the security and defense spheres. In July 2003, Kazakhstan and NATO signed an agreement with NATO's Maintenance and Supply Organization (NAMSO).

In 2003, systemic military cooperation between Kazakhstan and NATO began; the Steppe Eagle (tactical antiterrorist military exercises) that involved aeromobile troops of the U.K. and U.S. International exercises on the republic's territory allow the Kazakhstani army to improve its fighting skills by acting side by side with the military from other countries. From that time on, Steppe Eagle became an annual event. In February 2004, the republic joined NATO's Operational Capabilities Concept, the information and documentary center of which was opened in Astana. In the same year, Kazakhstan acquired observer status in NATO's Parliamentary Assembly.¹⁷

Brussels has obviously come to stay in Central Asia. I have already written that in 2004 it created the post of NATO Secretary-General's Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia and appointed Robert Simmons to it. He is keeping the contacts with the top regional leaders alive and is doing his best to promote NATO's interests.¹⁸ He frequently visits Kazakhstan (as well as other Central Asian countries); his personal meetings with President Nazarbaev and the president's telephone talks with NATO leaders add vigor to the sides' cooperation for the sake of regional and international security.

The highly dynamic interaction between Kazakhstan and NATO pushed their cooperation to a higher, fourth, level. The new stage which began in 2006 is still going on: strategic cooperation became much closer. In January 2006, a meeting of the NATO- Kazakhstan Military-Political Committee held at NATO Headquarters discussed and prepared for final endorsement the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) that harmonized all aspects of practical cooperation and dialog between Kazakhstan and NATO. The Plan is designed to expand cooperation and create its new parameters in the NATO + 1 format: cooperation in the military sphere, in many sciences, the environment, and the system for preventing emergencies and liquidating their effects.¹⁹

The Plan enacted on 31 January, 2006 made Kazakhstan the first NATO Central Asian partner armed with new cooperation tools. This was a logical step for a country that had already joined NACC and Partnership for Peace Program, which fully corresponds to the ideology and aims of the political, economic, and democratic reforms underway in the country.

On the whole, Kazakhstan regards integration into global and regional security systems as a key element of its national security; this makes close and mutually advantageous partnership with the Alliance one of its foreign policy priorities. The republic is striving for mutually advantageous and equal cooperation in defense; reform and modernization of its armed forces; combating terrorism and drug trafficking; security on the borders; science; and the environment. We can safely say today that Kazakhstan's diplomacy is moving forward toward these aims.

Its interaction with NATO is of a multilevel nature and is being carried out in various formats, as well as within the framework of all sorts of military and non-military programs. The very fact that the NATO leaders describe Kazakhstan as the Alliance's key strategic Central Asian partner shows that cooperation has proven fairly effective. It is impossible to overestimate the republic's role in the Alliance's Central Asian strategy—today it is NATO's only pillar in the region. The Kazakh leaders take into account the republic's national interests in modernizing its military complex, as well as the

¹⁷ Based on the materials of the Khabar information agency, available at [www.khabar.kz].

¹⁸ See: G. Aybet, "Towards a New Transatlantic Consensus," *NATO Review*, Autumn 2004, available at [www.nato.int].

¹⁹ Based on the materials of the Khabar information agency, available at [www.khabar.kz].

fact that their balanced policy of drawing closer to NATO provides the latter with a relatively stable regional, albeit limited, position.

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Diplomatic rivalry between the West, on the one hand, and Russia and China, on the other, over special relations with Kazakhstan is going on unabated, with each of the sides trying to outdo the other in order to draw the republic into the CSTO, SCO, and NATO. Positive official rhetoric and all sorts of diplomatic maneuvers designed to flatter Kazakhstan, however, failed to successfully address the region's central issue—building an effective and balanced regional security system.

President Nazarbaev points out time and again that stronger and broader international cooperation in the struggle against security threats and challenges presupposes an integral approach. The country is working and will continue to work toward closer regional cooperation in order to meet today's challenges by taking part in joint military exercises within the CSTO and SCO and in NATO's counterterrorist initiatives and operations.²⁰

It seems that Kazakhstan's active involvement in the CSTO and in the Alliance's programs has made it possible for the republic to set up an absolutely indispensable system of checks and balances in regional geopolitics. This largely meets the interests of all the Central Asian countries. On the other hand, the SCO's active policy (its Chinese element in particular) allows the region to avoid a CSTO-NATO confrontation and forces all those involved to seek constructive solutions to the region's central cooperation problems.

Balanced cooperation between the Central Asian republics and the CSTO and SCO, on the one hand, and between the Central Asian republics and NATO, on the other, presents a strategically consistent and rational course toward stability at the national and regional levels. An upsurge of rivalry between the two sides might negatively affect the local countries: control will be lost; challenges and threats will become even more prominent, together with geopolitical disbalances; regional contradictions will become exacerbated; the rates of economic development will slow down, making the countries much less attractive to potential investors; and the local countries might even lose their foreign policy aims.

This means that it is highly important for Kazakhstan and the other Central Asian states in need of stability to build their cooperation with the above-mentioned structures on the basis of clear logic and strategy of action, as well as minimize the possibility of stiff rivalry among them. Kazakhstan, as a country devoted to balanced international military partnership, is in a position to start building a platform for constructive dialog, consultations, and interaction among the CSTO, SCO, and NATO to prevent a regional crisis. In the future, everything will be done to find a balance between the Central Asian states' integration into the international and regional security structures and their independence in decision-making on all international issues that affect their national interests.

From the point of view of the local countries' interests, NATO is doing a lot to ensure regional security and help some of the local countries develop, modernize their armed forces, master the latest military technology, etc. Today's threats are equally dangerous for all sides, which means that it is the duty of all the key geopolitical players to maintain the balance; they should cooperate—otherwise

²⁰ See: *Poslanie Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan N. Nazarbaeva narodu Kazakhstana. Kazakhstan na poroge novoy ryvka vpered v svoem razviti*, 1 March, 2006, available at [www.akorda.kz].

regional tension will persist. NATO should revise its Central Asian policy to meet the changed geopolitical and strategic situation. The old tactics of distancing and fragmentation will merely allow the Alliance's rivals to squeeze its armed forces out of Central Asia.
