

CENTRAL ASIA: NATO'S MILITARY-POLITICAL STRATEGY AND RUSSIA

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Following the Soviet Union's demise, the situation in Central Asia changed radically: it has become an object of attention of various regional and global geopolitical players. This region, which is rich in natural resources (primarily gold, oil, and gas) and which used to be off-

limits for the leading geopolitical players with strategic interests in this key area, has now opened up and become an attractive playground for these various strategic forces.

The United States, in its desire to consolidate its global leadership, is especially active there and is fully aware of the region's strategic role as the heart of Eurasia. We can expect the United States to follow the geopolitical formula offered by prominent American political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski, who declared "[he] who rules the World-Island [Eurasia] commands the world"¹ and try, in the long-term perspective, to increase its influence in the region by every available means and method. It goes without saying that political influence in any corner of the globe rests on military presence. This is why the White House is out to strengthen the military component of its Central Asian policies by placing its military bases in some of the Central Asian states and Afghanistan. The events of 9/11 and the counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan, in which the U.S. was actively supported by its NATO allies, were used as a pretext to build up America's influence in Central Asia. Indeed, while realizing its strategic conception, Washington is exerting strong ideological influence on NATO, America's main military ally.

Today the Alliance's strategic priorities have been transformed to fit the counterterrorist struggle and anticrisis measures being implemented during the military operation in Afghanistan (launched in October 2001) and the postwar settlement there. In fact, the U.S.-led counterterrorist operation made it possible for America and NATO to entrench themselves in Central Asia; their military presence there is also explained by the mounting tension world wide.

Today, Central Asia serves as the main strategic base for both Washington and NATO still engaged in post-conflict settlement in Afghanistan—this has tipped the regional balance of power in favor of the U.S. and the EU and has somewhat diminished the threat of proliferation of in-

¹ Zb. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, New York, 1997, p. 38.

ternational terrorism. NATO is actively supporting its military presence in Central Asia by means of all-round political cooperation with the local states; in fact we have already discerned the outlines of NATO's military-political strategy in Central Asia.

Stronger cooperation between NATO and the Central Asian countries has been translated into practice in the form of these republics' support of the United States and its NATO allies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan opened their military bases and air space (within the ISAF) for the American and coalition forces involved in Operation Enduring Freedom, while Kazakhstan supports Poland (engaged in mine clearing in Iraq); it also opened its air space for U.S. transport planes bringing military cargoes and troops to the American contingents deployed in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, etc.

Russia, which has always looked at the region as a zone of its traditional interests, is naturally displeased with its stronger cooperation with NATO. The Alliance responds by encouraging Russia to be more actively involved in the Partnership for Peace program, as well as in the Russia-NATO Council. This will inevitably reduce tension and create favorable conditions for the development of mutually advantageous contacts.

Had this happened some ten years ago, the Russian Federation would have regarded its "encirclement" by NATO military forces as a geopolitical catastrophe. Today, Moscow appears to be composed, even though some Russian politicians are calling on Russia's political leadership to take adequate measures in response to the situation on certain stretches of the Russian border.

It seems that after 9/11 and the terrorist act in one of Moscow's theaters in 2002, the Kremlin no longer looks at NATO as an enemy. Seen from Moscow, the Alliance appears to be a potential partner; seen from Brussels, Moscow no longer looks like a potential strategic enemy—it appears to be an important partner and influential ally in the global counterterrorist struggle.

These positive shifts notwithstanding, the U.S. and NATO have come to Central Asia to stay.

While implementing their long-term projects in the region, they will have to keep in mind all sorts of circumstances, primarily Russia's natural strategic security-related interests. The latent

Moscow-Washington rivalry in Central Asia is betrayed by the fact that Kazakhstan, an obvious strategic outpost, has no NATO bases on its territory.

NATO's Policies in the Region

Cooperation with NATO began back in 1994 when four out of five Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—joined the Partnership for Peace program. Earlier, in 1992, the same states signed the Collective Security Treaty with several CIS countries (Russia among them). In 1999, the CST was extended: Belarus joined the treaty while Uzbekistan preferred to withdraw from it.

The NATO leaders hoped to use the Partnership for Peace program to bring European values to Central Asia. This did not happen: in the past ten years political democracy in the Central Asian countries has wilted.

Since 2002 armed forces of the NATO countries, mainly of the United States, have been stationed in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It would be wrong to describe the bases there as American since they are mainly used by NATO.

In view of the problems NATO is trying to cope with inside its own organization, Central Asia is probably the only place on earth where NATO members are maintaining relative harmony. Today the Alliance is pursuing the following strategic aims in Central Asia: support of the local regime striving to switch to democracy through Individual Partnership Action Plans; increased regional cooperation in the security sphere; setting up an effective system designed to oppose potential threats such as international terrorism, drug trafficking, illicit trade in arms, and other types of organized crime, religious extremism, etc.

NATO needs Central Asia and its strategically advantageous location to control the regions Brussels finds important from the military-strategic point of view. Its leaders point out time and again that NATO is doing its part of the job to preserve security in the 21st century and add that they would like to see Central Asia doing its part.² This is not all, however. NATO is pursuing another aim in the region, which the West prefers to pass over in silence. I have in mind its participation in modernizing the local armies, which will eventually squeeze Russia out of a region which so far has been completely relying on Russia's military equipment.

Cooperation between NATO and Central Asian states, based on NATO's military presence in the region, is realized on a wide scale in all spheres.

In Kyrgyzstan there is the Gansi American military base (at the Manas international airport near Bishkek) where transport planes, tanker aircraft, and all types of military machines and equipment, along with over 1,000 American military, are deployed. The base, the agreement on which can be extended every three years, is used for logistics support of the counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan. Washington has obviously come to the region to stay. According to American sources, in 2003 the base cost the Pentagon \$14 million; take offs and landings cost it \$7,000 per aircraft. On the whole,

² See: "Zaiavlenie general'nogo sekretaria NATO Djordja Robertsona," Vizit general'nogo sekretaria NATO Djordja Robertsona v Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Novosti MID Kyrgyzstana [http://mfa.gov.kg/index_ru.php?news=142].

Bishkek earns about \$45 million every year on the base—a strong argument in favor of its continued cooperation with Washington.³

There is an American military base in Uzbekistan (in Khanabad, Kashkadaria Region, in the republic's southwest, 500 km from Tashkent and 200 km from the Afghan border). Over 1,500 American military have been stationed there since October 2001. The lease expires in 20 years time. Washington spent money on its upgrading. This is more evidence of America's intention to remain in the region for a long time to come. There is another, auxiliary, airfield in the republic, in Kokayty, while in Termez (a town on the border with Afghanistan), there is a military air base used by a German contingent to move military cargoes of the forces involved in the counterterrorist operation and humanitarian aid.

In 2002, Tashkent and Washington signed an agreement on strategic cooperation, under which the United States would help modernize the armed forces of Uzbekistan. Americans supply military equipment and military stores and are involved (free of charge) in military education programs. On the whole, in 2002-2003, this aid cost America \$420 million. Uzbekistan received an additional \$21 million under the Cooperative Threat Reduction program. The U.S. plans to deliver 14 patrol launches for a total sum of \$2.9 million.⁴

There is a NATO military base in Tajikistan (in Dushanbe) where over 120 French military and its military transport planes are stationed on the permanent basis. In May 2004, armed forces of Tajikistan and France carried out joint military tactical exercises at the Fakhrabad training ground under a military and military-technical cooperation plan between the two countries for 2004.⁵

Since 2001 the U.K. has been funding, within the framework of the NATO-Tajikistan cooperation program, English lessons at the military lyceum and military institute of Tajikistan; every year Tajik officers travel to the U.K. for military training in military educational establishments. In October 2003, a German delegation headed by Brigadier-General Jürgen Bornemann visited Dushanbe where it discussed further military and military-technical cooperation with Tajikistan and pointed out that the sides should sign a bilateral military agreement in the near future.

There are no NATO military bases in Kazakhstan, even though the issue was discussed at the early stages of the counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan. There were plans to deploy NATO military aviation at the airfields in Shimkent and Lugovoy and a 5,000-strong U.S. mechanized infantry brigade at Karaganda. The project was not carried out, probably because of Kazakhstan's military-political obligations under the Collective Security Treaty and its agreements on strategic partnership with Russia.

Washington and Brussels, however, are still very active in Kazakhstan. In February 2004, U.S. Defense Minister Donald Rumsfeld and Kazakhstan Defense Minister Mukhtar Altynbayev discussed in detail bilateral military and technical cooperation between the two countries. Under the five-year plan signed in September 2003, the Republic of Kazakhstan was to receive American weapons free of charge, while a certain number of officer cadets and officers were to be invited for training in the United States. Kazakhstan could expect to get Huey-2 military helicopters, a C-130 military transport plane, and a patrol ship of up to 1,000 tons displacement at a reduced price. The country is receiving Hummers for army use. In 2005, Washington plans to allocate \$4.5 million to pay for ammunition and training of the Kazakhstani armed forces and about \$200 million to liquidate the old stores of Soviet weaponry.⁶ It is still too early to talk about these plans as real.

³ See: P.J. Luong, E. Weinthal, "New Friends, New Fears in Central Asia," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 2, March/April 2002 [<http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20020301faessay7972/pauline-jones-luong-erika-weinthal/new-friends-new-fears-in-central-asia.html>].

⁴ See: C. Hagel, J. Simon, "Partnership for Peace: Charting a Course for a New Era," *U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, Vol. 9, No. 2, June 2004.

⁵ See: *Krasnaia zvezda*, 17 August, 2004.

⁶ See: "SShA prodolzhaivat okazyvat tekhnicheskoe sodeystvie vooruzhennym silam Kazakhstana" [<http://www.khabar.kz/news/Uskz.index.cfm?il=89>].

The United States allocated \$19 million for the construction of military barracks in the Caspian port of Atyrau and presented grants for building up the Caspian Fleet of Kazakhstan.⁷ There are no plans to deploy military objects in Kazakhstan, nor are there plans for the republic to join NATO. Under the pressure of domestic and foreign security-related factors, however, Kazakhstan will continue cooperating with NATO within the Partnership for Peace program.

Speaking of Afghanistan, where NATO's military presence in Central Asia began, we should say that even though the Americans transferred control over the country to NATO, this should not be interpreted as America's inability to stabilize the situation. Washington knows that much time will be needed to establish law and order in the country. The White House did this to demonstrate that its plans are free from expansionism and to restore its allies' confidence in its policies. This step was probably intended to dissipate the fears of the Central Asian countries about its intention to expand its military presence in the region. As I wrote above, NATO is primarily associated with the United States, so Washington has not lost any of its ground in Central Asia—it has consolidated its control over the region through NATO, its traditional military instrument. By maintaining its control over the region, America can concentrate on its other strategic designs. From the American point of view, NATO's greater role in Central Asia has another positive side to it: the burden of military spending is spread evenly among all the NATO members involved in post-war settlement.

The changed status of the coalition forces in Afghanistan is part of NATO's plans to enlarge to the East; the same consideration applies to its stronger foreign military presence in Central Asia.

Today, NATO is absolutely satisfied with the fact that armed forces of both NATO and the CSTO are deployed side by side in Central Asian countries. It is very important to note that NATO is gradually entrenching itself in Russia's traditional zone of influence. The process is free from confrontation: Moscow cannot oppose it because it is being carried out in keeping with international standards, within the framework of the counterterrorist struggle, and under an agreement with the Central Asian countries themselves. It seems that Russia knows that cooperation is needed to oppose contemporary threats. This probably explains the Kremlin's changed attitude toward NATO.

Russia in Central Asia: A New Stage of Military Cooperation

Russia and the Central Asian republics are tied together by their common past. For strategic considerations, Moscow wants to preserve its influence in the region and can do this for the following reasons: Russia and the Central Asian states have a common security area; there exist the external security problems of some of the Central Asian countries; the RF and the Central Asian republics are involved in the integration processes in the post-Soviet expanse; due to the considerable economic dependence of the local countries on the Russian Federation; and in view of the Russian speakers who live in all the Central Asian countries.

In the 1990s, Russian diplomacy paid practically no attention to Central Asia. As a result Russia "abandoned" the region leaving a geopolitical vacuum behind to be filled by others. Moscow, which was gradually losing its ground, faced the risk of being squeezed out of the region altogether. Late in the 1990s, this period of inattention came to an end: Moscow realized that this impaired its strategic interests and might create negative trends in the region.

⁷ See: "SShA prodolzhauiut okazyvat tekhnicheskoe sodeystvie vooruzhennym silam Kazakhstana" [<http://www.khabar.kz/news/Uskz.index.cfm?il=89>].

When the United States came to the region under agreements with the local countries, Russia was confronted with a question of strategic importance: Did it need Central Asia? Late in the 1990s, Moscow, largely supported by the local leaders, stepped up its regional involvement. In May 2003, the Collective Security Treaty, which by that time had lost Uzbekistan, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, was transformed into the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which helped Russia regain a stronger foothold in Central Asia.

In the fall of 2003, the RF took another important step. It opened a military base in Kyrgyzstan—this fact was interpreted as Russia's and some of the Central Asian states' desire to see Russia's military presence in the region. In July 2004, during their personal meeting in Sochi, Russian President Putin and Tajikistan President Rakhmonov agreed on developing cooperation between their countries in all areas, including the military sphere. The relations between Moscow and Tashkent greatly improved under the pressure of common threats to their security and thanks to joint military exercises.

At the same time, positive developments in cooperation between the RF and local states are accompanied by certain problems. Moscow is very much concerned by Kazakhstan's plans to upgrade its air defense system with American, British, and German help (the project's total cost may reach \$1 billion). Russia is convinced that the project is interfering with Kazakhstan's obligations under the agreement on a joint air defense CIS project signed in 1995 and the principle of coordinated military-technical policies related to it. Through its involvement in the project, the Republic of Kazakhstan may give NATO access to certain strategic elements of the air defense system of the CSTO members and the CIS in general. In this case, Russia would have to pay for countermeasures, while the Russian military-industrial complex would be deprived of large military orders. Russia is also irritated by Kazakhstan's intensified cooperation with the United States, the U.K., Germany, and Turkey in military infrastructure, naval Caspian bases included.

Moscow is convinced that Kazakhstan has decided to move closer to NATO: indeed, Astana refused to support the Moscow-initiated idea of closer cooperation and partnership between CSTO and NATO on a collective basis. Astana obviously wanted to deal directly with NATO without Moscow or the controlling mechanisms of the CSTO.

Russia plans to supply its CSTO partners with weapons and military equipment at domestic prices and offer free training for their military in Russia to the detriment of its own budget. This is being done to intensify military cooperation within the CSTO.

On the whole, to promote its interests in Central Asia, Russia needs an adequate regional strategy: it should formulate the tasks and aims of its military-political and economic contacts with the local states and identify means and methods. America's latent opposition to such plans, as well as opposition from part of the local elites should be taken into account. Russia's interests in the region will be guaranteed if the country itself is perceived as a reliable strategic and deserving partner.

In the wake of 9/11, Moscow and Washington entered into a cautious dialog in which both sides hoped to clarify the intentions of each other. The period of cautious dialog about Central Asia, which has since become a zone of American influence, is nearing its end. Russia is clearly stepping up its political and military involvement in the region: the Kremlin is obviously resolved to preserve its influence in Central Asia. In one of his interviews, then Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said: "We are naturally not indifferent to the future of America's presence. When talking to the United States, we shall insist on maximum transparency of its military activity in the region and the time limits of its military presence there." The foreign minister went on to say that American military presence in Kyrgyzstan would "change nothing in our cooperation with this country."⁸

⁸ V. Panfilova, "Kirgizia stanovitsia bol'shim voennym aerodromom," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 7 April, 2002 [www.ng.ru/cis/2002-07-04/5_kirghizia.html].

On 9 December, 2001 at a briefing in Astana, Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbaev said that if Russia joined NATO “everyone will be satisfied.” “When there is neither a Cold War, nor West-East confrontation Russia’s NATO membership will probably reassure us all,” said the president. “I am convinced that the policy of squeezing Russia out of the world processes holds no promise for the West and the world in general. This is a wrong policy. Russia is a large country and a large power—it should be involved in these processes. We all will gain from this. We believe that the old Oriental saying ‘One cannot stop an elephant by holding its hind leg’ is fully applicable here.”⁹

Conflict Potential of NATO and Russia’s Military Presence in Central Asia: Possible Developments

I have already written that American and NATO military presence in Central Asia is explained by the counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan, which means that it is expected to shrink and come to an end as the situation in this country stabilizes. In fact, the situation is different: under the treaty on the lease of the Khanabad military base, the Americans will remain there for 20 years. This shows that the United States intends to remain in Uzbekistan for a long time to come.

All factors of NATO’s military presence in Central Asia indicate that close military-technical contacts between NATO and the Central Asian CSTO members might cause dissent in the regional security system.

- First, cooperation between Astana and Moscow obviously forms the core of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, therefore Russia’s military and political communities cannot approve of closer contacts between Russia’s No. 1 ally and NATO. Russia is closely following Kazakhstan’s military cooperation with other military blocs. In view of the strained relations between Russia and NATO, Moscow’s silence means nothing more than its intention to analyze the developments and decide on future moves. Today, Russia finds it unprofitable to object to military cooperation between Kazakhstan and NATO as long as it remains within the limits permitted by the CSTO and does not directly threaten Moscow’s interests.
- Second, the military-technical aspect of NATO’s cooperation with the local republics is potentially conflict-prone: the local armies mainly use Soviet and Russian weapons and depend, to a certain degree, on Russian supplies. The local armies find Russian weapons more practicable and more reliable—they are used to them. America and NATO, for their part, are actively developing their military technical cooperation with the Central Asian countries in an effort to participate in modernizing their armed forces. They begin with “gifts” in the form of military equipment. We all know, however, that there is no such thing as a free lunch. The White House is waiting for the local armies to get used to the new weapons and start asking for them and spare parts. There will be no more gifts—the weapons will arrive along with the bills. Washington is resolved to carry out these plans. At the same time, a wide variety of armaments and equipment in the CSTO members will interfere with their

⁹ “N.A. Nazarbaev. Vystuplenie na brifinge v Astane v dekabre 2001 goda” [www.gazeta.kz/art.asp?aid=10772].

cooperation and the treaty's efficiency. This will disrupt coordinated defenses and the very mechanisms of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Russia's defense industry will also suffer. This obviously creates numerous potential conflicts between Russia, on the one side, and America and NATO, on the other.

- Third, in the context of the counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan, Russia has a very reserved attitude toward the military presence of America and other NATO countries in Central Asia alongside Russia's military bases. If and when the counterterrorist efforts in the region come to an end, the turmoil around the 9/11 events will subside. Today, the world community is very much concerned by its suspicions that there was no "Arabian trace" in the terrorist attack on the United States, therefore it is hard to predict further developments.
- Fourth, while Russia is obviously stepping up its activity in the region, mainly in the military sphere, the U.S. and NATO are also expanding their involvement. It seems that Russia and America, together with NATO, are out to consolidate their military presence there and to screen their strategic designs and geopolitical ambitions with what they describe as important reasons, of which Central Asian security is one. Today, the prospect of a regional arms race is obvious. It looks doubtful that Washington and Brussels will ever leave the strategically important area, therefore they and Moscow should organize their cooperation to regulate their conflict-free military presence there. The local countries should promptly identify their military-political priorities in order to reduce the region's conflict potential and not lose their way in the convolutions of the Russia-NATO rivalry.

It looks as if the White House and NATO will pursue the following goals in the near future:

- closer relations with the Central Asian countries based on the current favorable situation created by the counterterrorist operation;
- creating conditions under which other external forces, primarily Russia and China, will be unable to control the processes in the region and channel them against America and NATO;
- extension and modernization of the military bases now being used and acquisition of more military objects in the region;
- access to fuel, energy, and other Central Asian resources;
- access to the local market for American investments, goods, and services and encouragement of structural economic reforms.

It seems that the counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan was launched with these aims in mind. The White House then tried to lighten its material and financial burden by gradually drawing NATO into it without taking account of how their strategic approaches to the region differ. In other words, the interests of the United States and the European NATO members clearly diverge; Europe has acquired a different view of the Central Asian countries. In fact, the basic interests of the U.S. and EU differed from the very beginning, yet were smoothed over by the West's united position and strategy. When becoming entrenched in the region, America was guided by its geopolitical considerations. The European NATO members, for their part, the main trade partners of Russia, Kazakhstan, and other CIS countries, have their own, mainly trade and economic, interests there. It seems that while helping the United States to gain access to the region they risked being left out in the cold.

In view of these divergent interests and aims, we can expect that the U.S.-EU contradictions in Central Asia will intensify. Indeed, Europe's suspicions of America's double game in Central Asia

are justified. There is any number of facts proving that the White House is pursuing its own interests in Central Asia, the Caspian, and the Caucasus with the help of NATO as its military-political instrument. America completely disregards its European allies, whose contribution is reduced to funding. Under these conditions, Russia has a chance of regaining its ground in the region.

A careful investigation of America's actions in Central Asia suggests another conclusion: Washington intends to strengthen its military-strategic presence in Central Asia and dominate there. This is supported by Jaap de Hoop Scheffer's intention to appoint Robert F. Simmons as his special representative in the Caucasus and Central Asia responsible for working contacts with the local leaders. He is expected to help realize NATO's goals and provide consultation for the countries involved in the Partnership for Peace program about the instruments to be used to extend their relations with NATO.

This smacks of the Big Game which unfolded in the region at the turn of the 20th century. Today, however, the partners, as well as means and methods are different: Russia, too, is justifying its attempts to establish a closer military alliance with the Central Asian countries within the CSTO by means of the counterterrorist struggle. It should be said that the arguments proffered by Washington, NATO, and Russia in favor of their military presence in the region are explained by their desire to consolidate their political domination. This makes geopolitical rivalry inevitable.

The local countries have to take the three actors and their activities into account, yet they can choose between them. The choice between cooperation among the external actors or their rivalry partly depends on the local leaders. This affects all the processes in the Central Asian countries. Russia must come to the realization that today NATO in Central Asia is a close neighbor and not a distant factor.

The question of the region's future as a zone of active cooperation among the U.S., NATO, and Russia, rather than of their rivalry, has become a priority. Today, it is hard to predict future developments: sides which stand aloof from each other are trying to decide what to do next. They remain reserved and move forward cautiously, step by step, in expectation of a counter move from their rivals.