

BULLETIN

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Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief), Katarzyna Staniewska (Executive Editor),
Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz, Beata Górka-Winter, Artur Gradziuk, Beata Wojna

NATO–Central Asian Republics Cooperation Until the End of the Mission in Afghanistan and beyond 2014

Konrad Zasztowt

Ending the mission in Afghanistan increases the role of the republics of Central Asia as transport routes for NATO troops and equipment. However, the cooperation of the West with the countries of the region should not be reduced to immediate logistical purposes. NATO, the U.S. and the EU, while shaping their policy towards Central Asia, should support the modernisation processes in the region beyond 2014. The lack of such measures may contribute to the emergence of new regional security threats beyond an unstable Afghanistan.

NATO's military cooperation with Central Asian republics in the context of the operation in Afghanistan dates back to 2001. Then, Kyrgyzstan allowed NATO troops to use Manas air base while Uzbekistan lent Karshi Khanabad air base. In 2005, the United States criticized the bloody suppression by the Uzbek authorities of the rebellion in Andijan. As a result, the government in Tashkent refused to let U.S. troops stay at the base. However, the German and Danish contingents still use the Uzbek airport in Termez for transit purposes. Kyrgyzstan's Manas remains a key transport hub for the supply of aircraft fuel and the transportation of troops to and from Afghanistan. The government in Bishkek is officially committed to the total demilitarisation of the Manas airport. Under the current agreement, the NATO presence should end in 2014. It seems, however, that recent U.S. talks will lead to the continued use of the airport in its present form once financial conditions more favourable for Kyrgyzstan have been negotiated. Against the background of deteriorating conditions for transit routes through Pakistan, an overland route running through Central Asia, the so-called "Northern Distribution Network" (NDN), has become a vital line of communication for the coalition, or International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). After last November's friendly fire incident in which NATO drones fired on Pakistani soldiers, the government in Islamabad completely closed the southern supply route to Afghanistan. About 75% of non-military cargo transported by land now arrives through the Central Asian states.

The Importance of Cooperation with NATO for Countries of the Region. The idea of the NDN was to serve not only military aims but also to boost economic ties in the region through the reconstruction of the so-called "Silk Road", the trade route linking southern and eastern Asia with the Middle East and Europe. NATO not only carries cargo across but also buys goods in the countries of the NDN, which brings income to local producers. For the governments of Central Asia, giving NATO access to their roads, railways and airports brings not only economic but also political benefits. The success of the ISAF coalition is in the interest of the Central Asian governments. The failure of the Alliance's mission would result in the proliferation of radical Islamic groups and a further escalation of drug trafficking from Afghanistan. These threats, already serious, will increase after NATO troops withdraw from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. NATO assistance with the modernisation of the military units of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is not without significance as these countries remain most vulnerable to the actions of Islamic militants. At the geopolitical level, NATO political–military cooperation with the countries of the region balances the influence of Russia and allows these states to exercise a multi-vector policy.

Cooperation between NATO and the Central Asian states, however, has its pathological side. The beneficiaries are not the societies, but the political elites of these countries. After the overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev of Kyrgyzstan in 2010, the corrupt system for supplying fuel to

NATO air forces at Manas was disclosed. The only companies drawing profits were those belonging to the former president's son, Maxim. Taking advantage of the political dominance by the Bakiyev family, these companies avoided paying taxes. Under the guise of safety concerns, there were no tenders for the fuel supplier. Such practices are common in all the countries of the region, and fighting such conditions under authoritarian regimes is difficult or even impossible.

Critics of U.S. cooperation with the countries of the region highlight the controversy surrounding the U.S. training and arming of local units of special forces. In Tajikistan, they are de facto Praetorians of the authoritarian rulers. The counter-argument to criticism of this support lay in the fact that the government in Dushanbe is trying to fight Islamic militant groups penetrating the region from Afghanistan. This struggle, however, has been ineffective, as evidenced by the failures of Tajik counter-terrorism operations in recent years. In addition, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, on the pretext of combating terrorism, has oppressed activists of the opposition Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan, which is not an extremist organization. Since the end of the civil war in 1997, the party has peacefully existed in the political life of Tajikistan.

NATO military presence is not always a stabilising factor for local political systems. President Bakiyev's case may be an example. Most likely, his collapse in April 2010 was influenced by Russian actions provoked by the too-pro-American policy of the Kyrgyz leader, especially given his consent for the continuation of the NATO presence in Manas. The new Kyrgyz authorities after April 2010 did not break military cooperation with NATO, however. President Almazbek Atambayev—like his predecessors—is trying to steer a middle course between the expectations of the country's NATO partners and Russia as well as his own society. The public is opposed to continued use of the Manas base by foreign troops. The impact of Russian media on Kyrgyz anti-American sentiments should not be underestimated. The Manas problem remains one of the important factors shaping (and potentially destabilising) both the international and internal situation in Kyrgyzstan.

Conclusion and Recommendations. NATO member states help local power structures fight drug trafficking and the activities of Islamic militants. Such cooperation is, of course, favourable to the Alliance, whose interest is to maintain a stable situation in the countries of the NDN. NATO's military cooperation with Central Asian republics may have transformational potential for them. However, it should not boil down to only the provision of equipment to local special military units. One has to remember that many of the local governments, under the pretext of fighting against Islamic terrorists, struggle with all sorts of opposition activities. NATO countries should take care of their image in the eyes of the Muslim societies of Central Asia, avoiding controversial gestures of support for authoritarian regimes. It is necessary that phenomena such as the participation of local, high-ranking officials in the smuggling of drugs are not allowed to continue without a reaction by the international community, including NATO and the EU.

The Alliance and the Union should pursue a dual policy of dialogue with the political elites accompanied by the monitoring of human rights. Where possible, support for the processes of democratisation is desirable. NATO and the EU should differentiate their policies for each of the countries in the region. Support for political transformation makes sense first of all in countries that have the most potential for the evolution of the political system (Kazakhstan) or those susceptible to the soft power of European countries and the United States (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan). NATO's participation in this process should include assistance for the modernisation of the army and the creation of procedures for civilian control. The EU's development assistance and humanitarian aid may reduce the risk of increasing the popularity of radical Islamic organizations. The latter recruit their members from amongst the impoverished, socially excluded groups.

All these problems, if ignored by NATO and the international community, will lead to a further weakening of the local state structures. The threat that Central Asian republics will become failed states, unable to fulfil their basic functions in the security sphere, remains real. The risk of such a scenario may increase with a decline of the West's interest in the region after 2014. It is necessary to act now to prevent such a course of events in the future.

NATO should continue its dialogue with Russia on issues of regional security in Central Asia. More constructive cooperation in this sphere is in the interest of the Alliance, as well as the Russian side because the escalation of drug trafficking or the activities of Islamic fundamentalist organisations are a threat not just affecting the security of the region but also Russia itself.