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Energy: NATO's 'Achilles' Heel'?

The conflict in Afghanistan has pushed NATO's energy supply capabilities to the limit. Yet the Alliance's energy security challenges extend beyond military operations in this country and remain subject to the economic conditions and political will of its member states.

By John CK Daly for ISN

Despite being the international system's most formidable military alliance, NATO continues to confront a longstanding operational problem. Of its 28 member states, only two – Canada and Norway – are energy exporters. The remaining 26 import energy supplies, most notably from the Russian Federation and the Middle East. Given this situation, the issue of sustaining energy supplies in the face of NATO deployments beyond the traditional European contexts remains an ongoing problem – most notably in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan: Pushing the limits?

Established in 2001 by a UN mandate, the [International Security Assistance Force](#) (ISAF) in Afghanistan has been under NATO leadership since August 2003. NATO's ISAF mission in Afghanistan is the biggest expeditionary operation in the Alliance's history. By November 2011, NATO forces in Afghanistan [consumed](#) an average of 1.8 million gallons of fuel per day, with 99 per cent of their fuel being delivered by trucks transiting Pakistan.

The transit route was interrupted after a NATO aerial assault on two border posts in November 2011, which killed 24 Pakistani soldiers. Islamabad promptly shut the transit routes, forcing NATO to [shift](#) its logistics operations to the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), a 3,212 mile-long railway link which began operation in February 2009. Running from Latvia's Riga Baltic port through the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan, it terminates at the Uzbekistani town of Termez on the Afghan border. The move left NATO reliant on the Russian Federation for transit rights for virtually its entire logistics infrastructure in Afghanistan. While the Pakistani route has [ostensibly](#) been reopened, ISAF's supplies continue to use the NDN.

Fortunately for NATO, the Russian Federation has proven willing to support NATO's efforts in Afghanistan. On 29 June the Russian Federation approved ground and air transit of NATO goods over its territory via a NATO transit hub in [Ulyanovsk](#). But highlighting the vulnerability of NATO's 'Russian connection,' permission was granted on the condition that certain points -- including customs clearance, availability of official certificates and other requirements – be adhered to. All of these conditions therefore became political bargaining issues between the Alliance and Moscow.

Diverting transportation to the NDN also caused ISAF's logistical costs to soar. [According](#) to Vice Admiral Mark Harnitchek, director of the US Defense Logistics Agency, "on the ground, it's almost three times more expensive to come from the north than it does from Pakistan." As a result, in a report released in February, Harnitchek [said](#) of resupplying Afghanistan is "the logistics challenge of our generation".

Future risks

Yet the challenge of safeguarding NATO's energy supplies goes way beyond Afghanistan. In late 2008 discussions began about possibly expanding Chapter V of the 1949 [North Atlantic Treaty](#) to provide support to member states under threat of limitations to its energy supplies. During a February 2009 interview in Russia, former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was asked about this angle. Albright [replied](#):

"To my knowledge, there are no plans to amend Chapter V of the North Atlantic Treaty, which commits members to mutual defense in the face of an armed attack. The question of how to interpret that article in light of new threats can only be made by members of the alliance in response to particular circumstances. Certainly, a situation in which crucial oil and gas pipelines were destroyed by terrorists or by other hostile forces would be a matter of concern to the entire international community."

While the discussions resulted in no immediate Alliance policy changes, they were nevertheless significant in that they represented a potential expansion of NATO's concerns beyond purely military issues. Given the reliance of many NATO members on energy imports from volatile regions outside their control -- particularly in the case of Turkey -- such an expansion held the possibility of deepening NATO involvement in deeply unstable parts of the world. As the majority of Turkey's energy imports come from the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan and Iran, an expansion of alliance concerns to include member states' energy security would, therefore, significantly boost NATO's responsibilities.

At the [April 2008 NATO summit](#) held in Bucharest, a last-minute initiative by then-US President George W Bush to persuade the allies to admit Georgia and Ukraine to NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP) failed -- even as the allies decided to begin negotiations to admit Croatia and Albania. Incorporating Georgia and Ukraine -- states with significant unresolved political issues dating back to the dissolution of the USSR and strained relations with Moscow -- could have meant NATO becoming entangled in disputes with Russia. The wisdom behind this decision became apparent four months later when the long-frozen conflict between Georgia and Russia suddenly defrosted, erupting into a five day conflict.

Four years on, Turkey still remains the Alliance's 'front-line state', sharing borders with some of the most volatile regions of the international system. The political upheaval in Syria, for example, has resulted in almost 50,000 refugees crossing the Turkish-Syrian border. After Syria [downed](#) a Turkish Air Force jet on 22 June, Ankara invoked Chapter IV of the NATO charter to convene an extraordinary meeting of NATO members. Much to everyone's relief, Turkey did not invoke Chapter V over the Syrian attack. Further highlighting the volatility of Turkey's eastern frontier on 20 July the Kirkuk-Yumurtalik oil pipeline -- which also delivers Iraqi oil to Ceyhan and has frequently been attacked by the PKK -- was "sabotaged" and set alight, [according](#) to Mardin province governor Turhan Ayva.

Accordingly, NATO's eastward expansion has had to confront the continued fallout from the political fragmentation of the Soviet Union while continuing to pay increasing attention to the fragility of the Middle East. But in an era of declining defense budgets is the Alliance capable of effectively responding to these issues? And if so, what would NATO's response actually entail? NATO troops to

guard the Baku- Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline? Intervention in Iraq to quash PKK bombing attacks on Turkish pipelines? The kaleidoscope of possibilities goes far beyond NATO's original 1949 charter intention to prevent an armed attack by the Soviet Union on Western Europe. And as a result of missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, a prolonged commitment beyond NATO's frontiers seems unlikely.

Catching up

Yet NATO continues to demonstrate that it now recognizes the increasing vulnerability of its energy supplies. On 10 July Lithuania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that a NATO Energy Security Center of Excellence was to be [established](#) at the country's General Jonas Zemaitis Military Academy. The Center's goals will be to support the process of developing military capabilities, improve mission effectiveness and interoperability, and provide qualified and timely expert support to solve energy security issues. While this is a step in the right direction, the fragility of many natural resource producing regions will remain a cause for concern for the foreseeable future. Moreover, NATO also needs to confront the challenge of balancing domestic energy requirements with logistical problems associated with missions beyond the Alliance's Euro-Atlantic heartland. Afghanistan will continue to put a strain on NATO's personnel, finances and energy-hungry equipment, while re-emphasizing that a member states' energy infrastructure is neither one of NATO's areas of expertise nor its *raison d'être*.

The Alliance's energy challenges also reinforce the vulnerability of certain member states' economies to running military operations in the Middle East, South Asia and beyond. The problem is especially acute for NATO's Central and Eastern European members, who are dependent on energy imports from such volatile eastern regions. Yet such concerns also extend to the United States, which also remains reliant on energy imports from more volatile parts of Latin America. Accordingly, with many Western economies experiencing problems since the global recession began in 2008, many NATO member states may prove to be increasingly reluctant to support operations outside of the Alliance's 'traditional' sphere of interest.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[NATO and Afghanistan: Beginning of an Orderly or a Messy Process of Withdrawal?](#)
[After Combat, the Perils of Partnership: NATO and Afghanistan beyond 2014](#)
[Opening the NATO Supply Route: Does Pakistan Have Any Option?](#)

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