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CENTRAL ASIA AND NATO AGAINST A BACKDROP OF CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL REALITIES

Uguloy Mukhtorova

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against a Backdrop
of Changing Geopolitical Realities**



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Fellowship Monograph

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INTRODUCTION

Central Asia is a landlocked but strategically important region neighbouring Russia, China, Iran and Afghanistan. Despite the history of the Central Asia-NATO partnerships dating back to the 1990s, the region became critical for the West only in 2001 due to its proximity to Afghanistan, where NATO and its coalition forces engaged early in the post-9/11 era. Central Asia served as a logistic hub for NATO operations in Afghanistan. While Central Asian states sometimes used their strategic geographical location as a bargaining chip to benefit from relationships with multiple regional actors, the 2014 NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan and the deteriorating Russia-NATO relations have gradually changed the geopolitical environment in the region. At the moment, Central Asia is in limbo—at least vis-a-vis its relations with the West—and slowly adapting to new geopolitical realities. This paper argues that the region has dropped from the list of priorities to a certain extent since the withdrawal of most NATO combat troops from Afghanistan coincided with the tensions between Russia and NATO over the Ukraine crisis. These factors are influencing the posture of the Alliance's Central Asian partners and might define their further level of cooperation with the West.

The following questions will be addressed in this paper: *How has the Central Asia-NATO relationship been characterized since the end of the Cold War? What current geopolitical changes are affecting Central Asia? Is NATO maintaining effective working ties with Central Asia? If so, how and why?*

FOUR PHASES OF CENTRAL ASIA-NATO RELATIONSHIPS

It is generally accepted that Central Asia encompasses five countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (though some scholars include Afghanistan and even parts of eastern China and Mongolia as part of the region, as well). The names and borders of these five post-communist countries were created by the Soviet Union, as there were no such states with these names before the Bolshevik Revolution.¹ After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian republics obtained independence and in most cases the former communist leaders took over the countries. As part of their foreign policy, they have joined a large number of international organizations or signed partnership agreements as newly sovereign states. The history of Central Asia-NATO relations dates back to the 1990s, starting with the North Atlantic Cooperation Council that was established in 1991 after the Cold War and succeeded in 1997 by the Euro-Atlantic Security Council, where all Central Asian states were members. Arif Bağbaşıoğlu defines three phases in the evolution of NATO policy towards Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus: (I) 1991-2001 (from the signing of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) agreements onwards); (II) 2001-2010 (Global War on Terror, Afghanistan period); (III) 2010 (when NATO's Strategic Concept was adopted at the Lisbon Summit and a decision on withdrawal from Afghanistan was made);² and with one more phase added by me starting from 2014 (IV) since 2014 (withdrawal from Afghanistan, Ukrainian conflict, crisis in Syria). I will briefly describe these phases below.

1 Payam Foroughi, "Politics and Human Rights in Tajikistan: Squandered Opportunities, Uncertain Future," in OSCE Yearbook 2011, ed. Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2012, pp.107-22.

2 Arif Bağbaşıoğlu, "Beyond Afghanistan NATO's partnership with Central Asia and South Caucasus: A tangled partnership?" *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 5; 2014, pp. 88-96.

I. Partnership Phase: Between 1991 and 2001 four out of five Central Asian states joined the PFP (Tajikistan joined only in 2002). It was an uneasy period for the new post-Soviet sovereign states, where some were experiencing internal crises.³ The establishment of partnerships between the said individual states and NATO was a step forward in changing their attitude towards the West and NATO, which had not long past been seen as part of the “eternal enemy” element of Soviet ideology. However, there had yet to be much practical cooperation between them and NATO. Former Kyrgyz diplomat, Djumakadyr Atabekov, describes the atmosphere of the era as follows: “They [Central Asian States] ... [were] discovering for themselves the benefits which derive from cooperation with NATO, in terms of helping to consolidate their [avowed] democratic reforms and bolstering political stability and security in the region.”⁴ Central Asian nations needed to become part of the international arena and made commitments as prerequisites for memberships or partnerships, *inter alia*, to NATO’s shared values with partners on security, fundamental freedoms, human rights, and justice through peace and democracy.⁵ However many of those commitments remained (and still remain) unfulfilled.

II. Afghanistan Phase: Central Asia became geostrategically critical for the West when NATO got involved with a landlocked region—Afghanistan—very far from its immediate borders. Prior to that, the existence of Central Asia was largely unnoticed by NATO. This was also a new experience for Central Asian nations, which were not familiar with tools of effective cooperation with NATO and, in some cases, are still adjusting to this process. In turn, the NATO members, particularly the U.S., spent a great deal of resources to build up relations by incentivizing regional governments to cooperate. The increase in U.S. spending on

3 Tajikistan suffered from civil war for five years (1992-1997), which might have led to 50,000 to 100,000 deaths, while Kyrgyzstan experienced conflicts in 1990 and 2010.

4 D. Atabekov, “The Kyrgyz Republic and NATO: A Formula for Cooperation,” *NATO Review*, 44 (6), 1996, pp. 30-33.

5 See, NATO, “Partnership for Peace: Framework Document,” http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_24469.htm (accessed November 2016).

assistance in the security sectors of Central Asia was a key part of this effort.⁶ The agreements with regional governments were on an individual basis. This outside-driven regional (as opposed to bilateral) approach and cooperation largely failed, as the autocratic leaders of Central Asia were “too suspicious of each other,”⁷ each desiring to lead the initiative. Even a number of Russian-driven regional initiatives have failed in the region.

NATO’s Istanbul Summit in 2004 referred to partnership with Central Asia as a priority,⁸ giving a new impulse to PfP cooperation between Central Asia and NATO. The history of the main activities carried out within/out of the framework of the PfP programme between Central Asia and NATO illustrates that the most remarkable events occurred in the second phase. This includes the appointment of a NATO Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia and the conducting of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council Security Forum for the first time beyond the Alliance’s borders, in Kazakhstan. Prior to the appointment of the Special Representative, Secretary Generals of NATO visited Central Asia in 1997, 2000, 2003, and 2004, expressing NATO’s interest in the region. Former NATO Secretary General Jaap De Hoop Scheffer, during his tour of Central Asia in 2004, stated: “A key element of NATO’s reorientation to address new threats is to make better use of the partnership relations that we have developed over the past decade.”⁹

Central Asian governments also realized how important the region is for the West and what kind of “security gain”¹⁰ NATO and its member states could bring to the region by deposing the Taliban. The

6 Elizabeth Wishnick, “Growing U.S. Security Interests in Central Asia,” <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub110.pdf> (accessed November 2016).

7 Vladimir D. Shkolnikov, “Missing the Big Picture? Retrospective on OSCE Strategic Thinking on Central Asia,” *Security and Human Rights*, 4: 2009, pp. 294-306.

8 See, “NATO’s relations with Central Asia,” http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_107957.htm (accessed November 2016).

9 NATO, “NATO Secretary General visits Central Asia,” [nato.int/cps/in/natohq/news_20736.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/in/natohq/news_20736.htm) (accessed November 2016).

10 Katja Gercak, “NATO in Central Asia: In Search of Regional Harmony,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly* Vol 6, No. 2, 2007. http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_turkey_tpq_2007_2_editorial.pdf (accessed December 2016).

region's governments provided assistance to NATO for carrying out its operations in Afghanistan by hosting Alliance member states' military bases (primarily in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) and allowing the use of their territories as transit routes. The agreements were mostly bilateral, between NATO member states and each country of region. For example, France made a deal for a transit base in Dushanbe (Tajikistan), Germany in Termez (Uzbekistan), and the U.S. in Karshi-Khanabad (Uzbekistan) and Manas (Kyrgyzstan). The presence of NATO indirectly helped to make Afghanistan itself more secure, which was a great help for Central Asian states to avoid spillover effects via the common borders (of three of the southern states) with Afghanistan.¹¹ As partners in the U.S.-led global war on terror (GWOt), the region's governments took advantage of the aid provided by the Alliance's member countries to strengthen their law enforcement structures.

III. Withdrawal Phase: The third period reflects the adoption of the new Strategic Concept in the Lisbon Summit in 2010, when the decision on withdrawal of combat troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014 was made. This decision gave Central Asia strategic importance for the second time. All five states were part of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), but now were seen as a main transit route for withdrawal. The shorter and less expensive route for withdrawal was through Pakistan. However, Islamabad blocked the route temporarily until Washington apologized for accidentally killing 24 Pakistani soldiers in 2011. It has been a long process, and it was not easy to communicate with Central Asian regimes on the NDN issue, where each was looking for its piece of the pie. NATO member states, likely acknowledging the Central Asian governments' hostile attitude to each other, again opted for an individual approach and made separate agreements.

11 Written interview with Joshua Kucera, an analyst on Central Asia and Caucasus, November 2016.

State by State Overview of Central Asian-NATO Relationships

The level of partnerships and cooperation between Central Asia and NATO varies from country to country. “NATO and its 41 partners around the world have a level of cooperation that is individually defined and tailor-made to satisfy each partner country’s ambition and desire to engage. The same, of course, applies to relations between NATO and the five Central Asian countries.”¹²

Kazakhstan has the most advanced cooperation of the five countries with NATO. Astana gives priority to this cooperation: “The development of partnership with the NATO is an important priority of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy”¹³ stated Dariga Nazarbaeva, the Chair of the Senate Committee on foreign affairs and defence, during a meeting with the Special NATO representative to Central Asia and Caucasus, in October 2016, in Astana.

Kazakhstan joined the Euro-Atlantic Council (former North Atlantic Cooperation Council) in 1992, and the PfP in 1995. In the following years, Kazakhstan continued to enhance its cooperation with the Alliance by joining various related partnership tools,¹⁴ such as the Planning and Review Process (PARP) in 2002. The PARP is a tool to develop interoperability and capability to receive training, exercises and then take part in NATO operations. The **Planning and Review Process (PARP)** helps develop the interoperability and capabilities of forces which might be made available for NATO training, exercises and operations. Under PARP, Allies and partners, together negotiate and set planning targets with a partner country. Regular reviews measure progress. In addition, PARP also provides a framework to assist partners to develop effective,

12 Written interview with James Apparthurai, Deputy Assistant to Secretary General of NATO for Political Affairs and Security Policy and NATO Secretary General’s Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia, November 2016.

13 Kazinform, “Дарига Назарбаева: Развитие партнерства с НАТО – приоритет внешней политики РК” [Development of Partnership with the NATO is Priority of Kazakhstan’s Republic Foreign Policy]; www.inform.kz/ru/dariga-nazarbaeva-razvitie-partnerstva-s-nato-prioritet-vneshney-politiki-rk_a2960281

14 See Partnership Tool, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_80925.htm

affordable and sustainable armed forces as well as to promote wider defence and security sector transformation and reform efforts. It is the main instrument used to assess the implementation of defence-related objectives and targets defined under IPAPs. PARP is open to Euro-Atlantic partners on a voluntary basis and is open to other partner countries on a case-by-case basis, upon approval of the NAC. The **Planning and Review Process (PARP)** helps develop the interoperability and capabilities of forces which might be made available for NATO training, exercises and operations. Under PARP, Allies and partners, together negotiate and set planning targets with a partner country. Regular reviews measure progress. In addition, PARP also provides a framework to assist partners to develop effective, affordable and sustainable armed forces as well as to promote wider defence and security sector transformation and reform efforts. It is the main instrument used to assess the implementation of defence-related objectives and targets defined under IPAPs. PARP is open to Euro-Atlantic partners on a voluntary basis and is open to other partner countries on a case-by-case basis, upon approval of the NAC. This is complemented by the Concept of Operational Potential programme. Kazakhstan is only one among other Central Asian nations that signed an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) in 2006, which helped Kazakhstan to enhance the cooperation and sharpened the focus on domestic defence sector reform.¹⁵ The country Evaluation and Feedback Programme is used to develop and train partner land, maritime, air or Special Operations Forces that seek to meet NATO standards. This rigorous process can often take a few years, but it ensures that partner forces are ready to work with Allied forces once deployed. Some partners use the OCC as a strategic tool to transform their defence forces. The OCC has contributed significantly to the increasing number of partner forces participating in NATO-led operations and the NATO Response Force. The T has the PfP Training Centre (KazCent) to implement the IPAP, and the NATO Resource and Information Centre, established in Al-Farabi University in 2007 with the support of NATO's Public Diplomacy Division. A year later, in 2008,

15 NATO, "Relations with Kazakhstan," http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49598.htm

the NATO Depository Library was opened in Astana. Kazakhstan was the first country in the region which agreed to host the NATO Liaison Office, until its transfer to Tashkent.

Kazakhstan designed its own battalion for peace operations, called KAZBAT, which was followed by KAZBRIG. With that, Astana, striving to bring the country's military close to European standards, was capable to deploy peacekeeping missions along with UN and NATO forces, if necessary. In 2010, Astana was about to send its troops to join ISAF in Afghanistan but later stepped back after being threatened by the Taliban on the consequences of such a decision.¹⁶ "Steppe Eagle" is an annual military exercise conducted since 1997 to improve the readiness of Kazakh peacekeeping units. This annual training for military officers usually alternates between Kazakhstan and another country. In 2016, the exercise took place in the United Kingdom, involving officers from the U.K., the U.S., Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan¹⁷ According to Rosaria Puglisi, former NATO Liaison Officer, Kazakhstan should soon be joining the Building Integrity Programme to fight corruption in the armed forces.¹⁸

Kazakhstan also provided an assistance package to Afghanistan as a contribution for regional cooperation. In 2013, Kazakhstan's President offered to extend the capacity of the Aktau port in the Caspian Sea for the withdrawal plans of NATO from Afghanistan. The Aktau seaport has been serving as NATO's supply route since 2009.¹⁹ However, Russian media speculated that the U.S. is going to set its next military base there, which became a source of concern not only for Moscow but for Tehran. Hence, during the 2014 Caspian Summit, any future presence

16 Kazakhstan's parliament refuses to send troops to Afghanistan <https://www.rt.com/politics/kazakhstan-senate-servicemen-afghanistan/>

17 Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan: <http://www.kazakhembus.com/content/steppe-eagle-2016>

18 Interview with Rosaria Puglisi, NATO Liaison Officer for Central Asia, Tashkent, July 2016.

19 George Voloshin, "Kazakhstan Proposes to Expand its Transit Facilities on the Caspian to Facilitate NATO's Withdrawal from Afghanistan"; <https://jamestown.org/program/kazakhstan-proposes-to-expand-its-transit-facilities-on-the-caspian-to-facilitate-natos-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/> (accessed November 2016).

of foreign bases in the Caspian basin was blocked by Russia and Iran.²⁰ It is important to underline that most of the time NATO is perceived as the U.S. Certainly, the U.S. is the main contributor to the Alliance; however, this misperception might hamper cooperation between NATO and Central Asia, where suspicion over rising U.S. influence in the region worries Russia, China and Iran.

The deep cooperation of Kazakhstan with NATO is, in most cases, related to its political will to be engaged with the Alliance and bring their system close to European standards. NATO partners are free to choose the fields and the way of cooperation by themselves. The Kazakh leader, 76-year-old Nazarbaev, has always positioned Kazakhstan as a Eurasian country and keeps its foreign policy well-balanced both with Russia, the West and with China too. He has visited NATO twice, in 2007 and 2010, and was invited to the Chicago Summit in 2012.

Kyrgyzstan has been NATO's partner since 1994 and joined the PARP in 2007 to enlarge the framework of cooperation. The Kyrgyz Republic is regarded as the second most active partner of the Alliance in Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan has experienced two revolutions (2005, 2010) and ethnic tensions in the south of country. It has continually maintained a multi-vector foreign policy. This country is relatively open to Western organizations, in contrast to other regional states. It hosts many international organizations and NGOs on its territory and is anecdotally referred to as the 'island of democracy' in the region. NATO's projects in Kyrgyzstan consist of training on assisting former soldiers to return to civilian life and language courses for military officers. As a part of NATO public diplomacy activities, summer schools are organized for young diplomats, and the Science for Peace and Security Programme is implemented as well. The NATO multimedia corner was officially opened in 2014 at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek²¹

20 Jacopo Dettoni, "Russia and Iran Lock NATO Out of Caspian Sea," *The Diplomat*; <http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/russia-and-iran-lock-nato-out-of-caspian-sea/> (accessed November 2016).

21 NATO Depository Libraries. <http://www.natolibguides.info/library/depository>

Furthermore, the Building Integrity Programme to fight corruption in the armed forces was launched in Kyrgyzstan. There is also a plan on inauguration of the Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP) to help to restructure military education curricula. According to Puglisi, the armed forces of Kyrgyzstan have changed very little since the collapse of the USSR and now are conducting reforms and participating in trainings offered in the framework of PFP programme.²²

Uzbekistan's history of relationships with NATO is controversial, where now-deceased Uzbek President Islom Karimov played a role. He was known for unpredictability and skillfully changing sides in foreign policy. Like other Central Asian states, Uzbekistan commenced its partnership with NATO in the framework of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council in 1992, and signed the PFP two years later. Uzbekistan's cooperation NATO is mainly focused on security and defence reforms, coordinated within the PARP. Uzbekistan's officers, unlike those from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, refrain from participating in military training, and only language courses are conducted for Uzbek defence officers.²³ "Uzbekistan is also independent-minded country and has a clear provision in its legislation, whereby Uzbek troops will never be deployed abroad. Thus, the level of NATO cooperation is based on that principle."²⁴ Given that, the Uzbek government collaborates in areas such as military education, civil emergency planning, and the Science for Peace and Security Programme.

Tashkent's relations with Brussels worsened in May 2005 after NATO along with other international organizations condemned the violent repression of civil unrest in the Fergana Valley in the city of Andijan, which left hundreds dead. Many recall that event as the 'Andijan massacre'. The entire international community, including the UN, EU, OSCE and

22 Interview with Rosaria Puglisi, former NATO Liaison Officer for Central Asia, Tashkent, July 2016.

23 NATO, "Relations with Uzbekistan," http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_22839.htm (accessed November 2016).

24 Interview with Rosaria Puglisi, former NATO Liaison Officer for Central Asia, Tashkent, July 2016.

NATO,²⁵ called on Uzbekistan to conduct an impartial investigation of the event, and the inquiry repeatedly was rejected by Tashkent, which said that the matter was an internal issue and that the law enforcement response was appropriate to the threat posed. The Secretary General of NATO expressed his disappointment in that regard.²⁶ He reiterated his concern during a press conference at the Euro-Atlantic Security Forum in Sweden (with a no-show by the Uzbek representative), convened two weeks after the bloodshed, questioning NATO's partnership with Tashkent:

“... You know that NATO has strengthened the call by the United Nations, by the European Union, by the OSCE, that there must be an independent international inquiry in what happened in Andijan and what happened in Uzbekistan. Unfortunately, the Uzbek government decided not to be here today and yesterday. That would have been interesting to have a discussion on ‘What does this partnership mean? What does upholding values mean? What does the rule of law mean?’ But unfortunately, the government in Tashkent decided not to be here but it goes without saying that the recent violence in Uzbekistan is on the agenda when we discuss Central Asia.”²⁷

Islom Karimov immediately shifted sides and turned to Russia and China. The issues related to U.S. military presence in Central Asia were raised in the China-led Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO) meeting and the Uzbek government was backed by Beijing and Moscow. Given that, the American air base in the Uzbek territory of Khanabad (known as K2) was evicted after a period of six months in 2005. However, this decision did not affect the German air base in Termez. Many

25 NATO, “Statement by the Secretary General on the situation in Uzbekistan” http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_21798.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed November 2016).

26 Jeffrey Smith, Glenn Kessler. “America Opposed Calls for a Probe,” *The Moscow Times*, <http://old.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/tmt/222587.html> (accessed November 2016).

27 NATO, Press conference by NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer after the plenary meeting of the EAPC Security Forum in Åre, Sweden, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_21781.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed November 2016).

experts believed that this was due to Germany's silence on the Andijan bloodshed,²⁸ and the German base remained until 2015.

Relations were restored only in 2008, when both NATO and Uzbekistan again felt a need for each other. NATO needed Uzbekistan, which shares a 137 km border with Afghanistan, to use its territory for the transit of goods, while the government of Karimov was concerned about the rising threat of radical groups from Afghanistan. Karimov was not concerned as much about the Taliban as about the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The IMU,²⁹ a battle ally of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda that originated from the Fergana valley, had challenged Karimov's regime a number of times since the early 1990s. Later the IMU was persecuted and took refuge in Afghanistan, from where it tried to penetrate the territory of Uzbekistan several times. Karimov and the leadership of the IMU never settled their score. NATO was well-positioned to fight against the IMU, which was fighting along with the Taliban against the Western coalition. The known leaders of IMU, Juma Namangani (2001) and Tohir Yuldash (2009), were killed during those battles. In 2008, Karimov was invited to the NATO Bucharest Summit and assured his Western partners of further cooperation:

“...I would like to state that Uzbekistan is ready to discuss and sign the Agreement with NATO on providing a corridor and transit through its territory to deliver non-lethal goods through the border node - Termez-Hairatan, practically the only railway connection with Afghanistan.”³⁰

The contract was signed later in 2010 on the basis of an agreement

28 Deutsche Welle, “Военная база в обмен на молчание” [Military base in Exchange of Silence]; DW, <http://www.dw.com/ru> (accessed on Nov 2016).

29 IMU is a terrorist organization established in the 90th by ethnic Uzbeks, who later fled from Uzbekistan and found a refuge in Afghanistan. The main goal was to overthrow the government of Islam Karimov. Later IMU joined Taliban and Al-Qaeda. See: Zeyno Baran. “*Radical Islamists in Central Asia*” https://hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/1366/baran_vol2.pdf

30 Information-Analytical Centre, “**Выступление на саммите НАТО**” [Statement at NATO Summit] <http://ia-centr.ru/expert/828/> (accessed on Nov 2016).

between Germany and Uzbekistan. The appearance of Islam Karimov side by side with NATO leaders was questioned by human rights organizations, asking what the Alliance was doing cooperating with the “iron-fisted” leader, who oppresses opposition and protestors.³¹ Despite this, since that Summit the cooperation has taken on new impetus and has run smoothly. High-level Uzbek representatives visited the Chicago Summit in 2012. A year later, Tashkent even agreed to accommodate the first NATO Liaison Office in May 2014.³² This was right before the planned withdrawal from Afghanistan, where Uzbekistan was a main transit hub and also profited from leftover equipment given by NATO member states as a part of the deal.³³

Holding a permanent neutrality doctrine for more than two decades prevents **Turkmenistan** from being a part of any military or security block, or from deploying its troops abroad. Turkmenistan is virtually closed and is the most self-isolated country in Central Asia. It has the poorest human rights/freedom record,³⁴ but one of the world’s largest gas reserves. Turkmenistan owns the world’s fourth largest proven gas reserves³⁵ and borders Afghanistan and Iran. Ironically, the country was the first to join the PfP agreement in 1994. After the death of the first president of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, his successor Gurbanguli Berdimuhammedov showed more interest in the Alliance’s activities, but practical cooperation remains limited. The initial Individual Partnership

31 Radio Free Europe, “Central Asia: Odd Couple Crashes NATO Summit,” RFE. <http://www.rferl.org/a/1079715.html> (accessed November 2016).

32 Joshua Kucera, “NATO To Open Liaison Office In Uzbekistan,” EurasiaNet.org <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67021> (accessed November 2016).

Note: The NLO is the first permanent/diplomatic presence of NATO in the region to coordinate and communicate with the Central Asian governments.

33 BBC, “The mammoth military task of leaving Afghanistan,” <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-25848662> (accessed November 2016).

34 Freedom House, “Nations in Transit 2016” (Category and Democracy Score Summary); https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_NIT2016_Final_FWeb.pdf (accessed December 2016).

35 Natural Gas World, “Turkmenistan: The Diversification of Gas Export Market,” NGW, <http://www.naturalgasworld.com/turkmenistan-the-diversification-of-gas-export-market-27160> (accessed on Dec 2016).

and Cooperation Programme (IPCP) was agreed on in 1995.³⁶ Currently, the primary activities of NATO in Turkmenistan are focused on public diplomacy and energy security, particularly the protection of infrastructure in that field. There are not that many activities - at least mentioned in NATO website- and one can easily number the events convened there, including the conference devoted to energy security on December 2016, and a forum on regional peace and stability convened on March 2015.

President Berdimuhammedov visited NATO HQ in 2007 and in 2008 and also attended the NATO Summit in Bucharest, together with his Uzbek counterpart Karimov, the two being referred to as an “odd couple.”³⁷ Later in 2009, during his visit to Tashkent, the Turkmen President announced that Ashgabat will provide support for use of their territory like Tashkent did: “We have nothing against the transit of humanitarian aid via our air corridor,”³⁸ thus making sure that Ashgabat is not alone on this. Turkmenistan used to support Operation Enduring Freedom by delivering aircraft fuel for NATO aircraft in Afghanistan and also by fuelling on its territory. The U.S. confirmed that the air base in Mary, Turkmenistan was used by the U.S. for Refuelling and Resupply Operations.³⁹

Tajikistan was the last country to join PfP, in 2002, due to its long-lasting civil war (1992-1997). As Heathershaw and Herzig point out, Tajikistan survived against all expectations.⁴⁰ The country joined the PfP right after NATO troops were deployed in Afghanistan, next door to

36 NATO, “Relations with Turkmenistan,” http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50317.htm (accessed on Nov 2016).

37 Radio Free Europe, Central Asia: Odd Couple Crashes NATO Summit, RFE, <http://www.rferl.org/a/1079715.html> (accessed November 2016).

38 Roger McDermott, “Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan Confirm New Supply Routes,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 6 Issue: 43*. <https://jamestown.org/program/uzbekistan-and-turkmenistan-confirm-new-supply-routes/>

39 Deirdre Tynan, “Turkmenistan: Ashgabat Hosts US Military Refuelling, Resupply Operations,” <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav070809.shtml> (accessed November 2016).

40 J. Heathershaw and E. Herzig, ‘Introduction: the sources of statehood in Tajikistan,’ *Central Asian Survey*, No.1:30, 2011, p. 8.

Tajikistan with a shared border of about 1400 km. After the civil war, the country's economy was devastated and country security forces were militarily fragile. The Tajik-Afghan border was guarded by Russian troops from 1993 onward and they left the border only in 2005, by official request from Dushanbe,⁴¹ thus opening the door for cooperation with new partners, including Western states, in the field of border management. The Tajik government urgently needed to gain the trust of external partners to rebuild the entire security sector and make commitments on promotion of democracy and human rights as pre-conditions of Western international organizations with which the country never fully complied. In 2003, President Emomali Rahmon paid his first visit to Brussels, seeking the support of the Alliance:

“Tajikistan believes that NATO, as an organization which is responsible for supporting peace and stability through a very wide area or expanse, must help us with very substantive assistance so that we can effectively resist new threats and challenges.”⁴²

Later, in 2004, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer during his tour of Central Asia visited Dushanbe and the transit agreement with Tajikistan to support the NATO/ISAF operation in Afghanistan was signed and a small French military contingent numbering 170-230 personnel was located in Dushanbe, which remained there until 2014.⁴³ Moreover, Tajikistan cooperated with NATO on clearance of landmines, public diplomacy, language courses, and the Science for Peace and Security Programme. President Rahmon visited NATO HQ twice and met Anders Fogh Rasmussen while in New York in 2010. Tajikistan is, however, the most passive Central Asian partner of the Alliance. Dushanbe has good

41 Novaya Gazeta. “Российские войска выдворяют из Таджикистана” [Russian troops are being expelled from Tajikistan] http://www.ng.ru/cis/2004-05-25/5_tadjikistan.html (accessed November 2016).

42 NATO, PRESS POINT by NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson and The President of Tajikistan H.E. Emomali Rakhmanov, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_20620.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed November 2016).

43 MFA of the Republic of Tajikistan. “Tajikistan and North Atlantic Treaty Organization,” <http://mfa.tj/en/relations-of-tajikistan-in-the-framework-of-international-and-regional-organizations/cooperation-tajikistan-nato.html> (accessed November 2016).

working relations with NATO member states (in particular, the U.S.) on security sector reform, anti-terrorism, measures against drug-trafficking and training security officers.

IV. Changing realities – from strategically important to politically neglected: In the fourth phase, since Alliance combat troops began their gradual withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014, Central Asia has turned from a “strategically important” into a “politically neglected”⁴⁴ region on the map of NATO’s PfP countries. Central Asian states and NATO have mainly seen each other through the Afghan prism. The withdrawal coincided with the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014, which has focused the attention of the Alliance to its Eastern flank. Most importantly, the deterioration of Russia-NATO relations gradually impacted not only member states of the Alliance, but also partner countries in the backyard of Russia—Central Asia. Now that the previous balance of power between Russia and the West no longer obtains, the region’s leaderships needed to redefine their foreign policy, adapting to new realities by shifting sides and seeking new partners to fill the gaps.

Life out of the “Comfort Zone”?

After handing over responsibility to Afghan security forces in 2015, the Alliance remained committed to supporting Kabul as stated at the 2016 Warsaw Summit in response to post-2014 concerns:

“Afghanistan will not stand alone. Together with the rest of the international community, our aim remains that Afghanistan will never again become a safe haven for terrorists who can pose a threat to our security.”⁴⁵

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, in his interview on the

44 Heidi Reisinger, “How to get out of Afghanistan: NATO’s withdrawal through Central Asia,” *Research Paper* n. 79, NATO Defense College, Rome, 2012.

45 NATO, “Warsaw Summit Declaration on Afghanistan,” http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133171.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed November 2016).

eve of the EU-hosted conference on Afghanistan in Brussels, confirmed NATO's future commitments:

“We will continue our presence in Afghanistan with our Train Assistance Advice Mission. We will have around 13,000 troops [non-combat] in Afghanistan. We will also continue to fund Afghan army and security forces till 2020.”⁴⁶

What about Central Asia? NATO's extensive presence in the region used to define its ties with Central Asian countries.⁴⁷ The existence of the post-2014 strategy in the region was questioned. The scenario is unfolding as predicted: “NATO's interest in the whole region might [will] drop drastically.”⁴⁸ This is what has happened, with implications for NATO's cooperation with Central Asian partner countries. A striking example is the closure of the last NATO ground presence, the NATO Liaison Office (NLO) in Tashkent, which was scheduled for April 2017.⁴⁹ The reason behind this decision is “the result of internal budgetary considerations only and bears no political character.”⁵⁰ This was NATO's last “direct door”⁵¹ to Central Asia to monitor security developments on the ground, while Central Asian states could reach out to NATO more easily via Tashkent than their desk office in Brussels.

It should be underlined that not only has NATO's interest in the

46 NATO, Doorstep by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan organized by the European Union in Brussels, on Wednesday 5 October 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loqrXFu5EZM> (accessed October 2016).

47 SIPA, “Central Asia in the Future of the Euro-Atlantic Community,” https://sipa.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/AY13_RAND_FinalReport.pdf (accessed October 2016).

48 Heidi Reisinger, “How to get out of Afghanistan: NATO's withdrawal through Central Asia,” *Research Paper* n. 79, NATO Defense College, Rome, 2012.

49 Fergana, “Офис связи НАТО в Ташкенте закрывается. Но работа альянса в регионе будет продолжена” [NATO Liaison Office in Tashkent will be closed. But the work of the Alliance in the region will continue] <http://www.fergananews.com/articles/9161> (accessed November 2016).

50 Written interview with James Apparthurai, Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs and Security Policy and NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia, November 2016.

51 Interview with Parviz Mullojonov, political analyst, Dushanbe, August 2016.

region been reduced, but overall the West has shifted its attitude. The sharp reduction of U.S. security assistance to Central Asia is another example of disinterest in the region. As estimated by *EurasiaNet*, based on statistics from the Security Assistance Monitor:

“The new data covers the first half of Fiscal Year 2014, from October 2013 through March 2014. Compared to the last full data, from 2012, there are big cuts across the board (even taking into account that the new numbers are for half a year, and the 2012 numbers for a full year):

Kazakhstan: \$187,000 - from \$8.7 million

Kyrgyzstan: \$1.2 million - from \$21.3 million

Tajikistan: \$1.1 million - from \$15.4 million

Uzbekistan: \$156.000 - from \$5.7 million”⁵²

Moreover, the new U.S. administration has proposed to slash the programmes of the U.S. State Department to Central Asia and Caucasus by more than half: from \$218.1 million in 2016 to \$93.1 million in 2018. For instance, the programme budget for Kyrgyzstan was \$48.4, while it will be reduced to \$17.5 in 2018.⁵³ Even though the new strategy of strengthening U.S. presence in Afghanistan was adopted, Central Asia remains out of it.

The ghost of Euromaidan in Central Asia

The eruption of the Ukraine crisis in 2014 after a series of purportedly “Western-manufactured” colour revolutions in the post-Soviet countries once again raised the tacit concern among Central Asian strongmen who

52 Joshua Kucera, “U.S. Slashes Military Aid to Central Asia.” <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68651> (accessed November 2016).

53 *EurasianetOrg*, “White House Proposes Slashing US Programs in Caucasus, Central Asia,” <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/83741> (accessed May 2017).

See also: U.S. Department of State, “FY 2018 Congressional Budget Justification - Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs” <https://www.state.gov/s/d/rm/rls/ebs/2018/pdf/index.htm> (accessed July 2017).

usually maintained regime security by use of “managed democracy.”⁵⁴ On the one hand, Western media exaggerated the possible recurrence of the Ukraine crisis in the region; on the other hand, Russian propaganda was alarming Central Asian leaders of the possibility of Western-organized coups and riots under the cover of democracy. The propaganda has enough consumers in the region, where many use Russian as a second language or mother tongue. After three years, it has proved to be a false alarm, like previous warnings of colour revolutions and “Arab springs.” However, the Ukraine crisis has raised paranoia and suspicions about Western diplomatic missions, organizations and even research.⁵⁵ The region is considered to be in Russia’s sphere of influence. Marlene Laruelle, a scholar of George Washington University, believes that Moscow uses “ideological, remunerative, and punitive” powers towards Central Asia when needed.⁵⁶

Therefore, the situation in Ukraine put all Central Asian states in an awkward situation, and this coincided with NATO’s withdrawal from Afghanistan in the same year. The aggressive behaviour of Russia in Crimea undermined the trust of Central Asians towards Moscow. The states did not want to comment on Ukraine at all, while some were pressured to take a stand and allegedly intimidated by Russians before the UN General Assembly on the annexation of Crimea.⁵⁷ As some rightly put it, Central Asian states are “hostage” to the relations between the Russia and the West (primarily meaning the U.S.)⁵⁸ Some Central Asian states, heavily dependent on the Russian economy, were badly affected by

54 Graeme P. Herd, “Colour revolutions and the CIS,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 52, no. 2, March/April 2005, pp. 3–18.

55 Uguloy Mukhtorova, “The Effect of Ukraine Crisis in Tajikistan,” OSCE Academy Policy Brief #19, http://osce-academy.net/upload/file/Policy_Brief_19.pdf (accessed November 2016).

56 Marlene Laruelle, “Assessing Russia’s Normative Agenda in Central Asia,” <https://www.bishkekproject.com/memos/16> (accessed March 2017).

57 Louis Charbonneau, “Exclusive: Russia threatened countries ahead of UN vote on Ukraine – envoys,” Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-un-idUSBREA2R20O20140328> (accessed November 2016).

58 Paul Stronski, “Uncertain continuity: Central Asia and the Trump administration” CAP Papers 188; April 2017.

the sanctions against Russia.

The Ukraine crisis raised concerns primarily in Kazakhstan, which shares the longest border with Russia (7,590km) and has a population including about 24% of ethnic Russians.⁵⁹ The Kazakh MoFA called for a peaceful settlement in Ukraine and the referendum in Crimea was called a “free expression of the will of the Autonomous Republic’s population”;⁶⁰ Kazakhstan abstained from voting at the UN General Assembly on the Crimea annexation.

In response to sanctions against Russia, Moscow decided in January 2015 to bolster a project initiated a long time ago, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) Project. Moscow did this together with Minsk and Astana, while also asking others to join. In fact, Nazarbaev sees the EEU as a pure economic alliance, not political,⁶¹ but it is unlikely that Moscow shares his view.

It is interesting to note that Russia retains several military facilities in Kazakhstan: “5th State Test Range of the Russian Defense Ministry (the Baikonur cosmodrome); facilities of the 4th State Test Site of the Russian Defense Ministry: the Kapustin Yar test range (located mostly in Russia, but also including areas near the Atyrau and Western Kazakh regions of Kazakhstan), the 20th Separate Measuring Station and two measuring facilities (IP-8 and IP-16, in Western Kazakhstan).”⁶²

Having experienced two regime changes or revolutions in a very short period in 2005 and 2010⁶³, Kyrgyzstan could well understand the

59 World Population Review, “Kazakhstan Population 2016,” <<http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/kazakhstan-population/>> (accessed November 2016).

60 Jamestown Foundation, “Kazakhstan Responds to Ukraine Crisis,” 24 March 2014, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11 (55), <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5332b98b4.html> (30 June 2014).

61 Zhulduz Baizakova and Roger McDermott, “Threat Perception in Central Asia in Response to Russia-Ukraine: Kazakhstan Will Not Be Next,” *Research Paper* n. 119, NATO Defense College, Rome, 2015.

62 Sputnik, “Russian Military Bases Abroad: facts and details,” <https://sputniknews.com/military/201610081046123220-russian-abroad-military-bases/> (accessed November 2016).

63 After the second regime change in 2010, the runaway Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiy found a refuge in Belarus, which is a member of the same Eurasian Economic Union and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

situation in Ukraine. The 2005 “Tulip Revolution” in Kyrgyzstan was viewed as one of a series of colour revolutions, starting in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004). The former Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiev fled the country and found refuge in Belarus in 2010, thus escaping prosecution. The Kyrgyz MoFA immediately denied the legitimacy of the former Ukraine president Yanukovich, who had also fled his country⁶⁴. A week later, a contradictory statement was issued in support of the Crimea referendum as an expression of the “will of the people.” Kyrgyzstan was considered as a client state of Russia and the demonstration of loyalty to Moscow was normal. In 2015, Kyrgyzstan became a full member of the Eurasian Economic Union, thus tightening its economic ties with Russia. It should be highlighted that about 32% of its GDP comes from migrant worker revenues from Russia.⁶⁵ Moreover, there is Russia military airbase in Kyrgyzstan and other military facilities.

Kyrgyzstan accommodated the U.S. military base in its civilian airport Manas to support NATO/ISAF operations in Afghanistan for several years. In 2014, the U.S. military contingent left Manas upon termination of the bilateral agreement. The Kyrgyz President had stated in 2012, during the visit of Angela Merkel to Bishkek:

“The first talk about the withdrawal of the Transit centre emerged in April 2010, but even then I said to the representatives of the coalition forces and the U.S. government that given the situation with Afghanistan, and Al-Qaeda, the base will run until 2014, and we kept our promise.”⁶⁶

Obviously, the Russia factor played its role, otherwise the mission

64 Arslan Sabyrbekov, “Bishkek’s First Official Statement on Ukraine,” <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/field-reports/item/12941-bishkeks-first-official-statement-on-ukraine.html> (30 June 2014).

65 World Bank, “Migration and Remittances: Recent Developments and Outlook,” *Migration and Development Brief #24*, <https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/3349341288990760745/MigrationandDevelopmentBrief24.pdf> (accessed December 2016).

66 Vecherniy Bishkek, «Атамбаев пообещал Меркель, что военные США покинут “Манас” в июне 2014 года» [Atambayev has promised to Merkel that the U.S. military will leave the ‘Manas’ in June 2014]. http://www.vb.kg/doc/208887_atambaev_poobeshal_merkel_chno_voennye_ssha_pokinyt_manas_v_iune_2014_goda.html

could have been extended with Bishkek benefiting from a rental fee of up to \$60 million per year. As many experts believe, Bishkek was pushed by Moscow. “In essence, the closing of Manas marks Kyrgyzstan’s new era as a Russian client state,” said Central Asia specialist Alexander Cooley, professor of political science at Columbia University’s Barnard College, in an interview in *The Guardian*.⁶⁷

Tajikistan, with 49% of GDP (2013)⁶⁸ coming from its migrant workers in Russia (over a million), is the world’s most remittance-dependent country and was heavily affected by the sanctions against Russia. The remittance flow has been drastically reduced. Moscow has always used Tajik labour migrants as a bargaining chip to keep Dushanbe accountable. Tajikistan’s representative did not show up at the UN General Assembly Meeting on Crimea, and neither did Tajikistan issue any statement on the Ukraine crisis. President Emomali Rahmon, on an unofficial visit to Moscow in March 2014, called for a “peaceful settlement” in Ukraine via dialogue, comparing it with Tajikistan’s civil war conditions.⁶⁹ The position of Tajikistan remained uncertain vis-à-vis Ukraine.

At the moment, Moscow is pushing a hesitant Dushanbe to accept the terms of the Eurasian Economic Union and enforce membership. Russia has more than enough leverage on Tajikistan and the EEU will be next. It needs to be highlighted that Russia has a military presence in Tajikistan’s capital city Dushanbe and in Qurghonteppa, with its 201st Motor Rifle Division (a garrison in the southern city of Kulob has been closed and integrated into the Dushanbe garrison), which Russia believes is a guarantee of Tajikistan’s stability. Moscow has never paid rent directly in cash and unsurprisingly, in 2012, Moscow extended the stay of its

67 *The Guardian*, “Russia tightens control over Kyrgyzstan,” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/18/russia-tightens-control-over-kyrgyzstan> (accessed November 2016).

68 World Bank, “Migration and Remittances: Recent Developments and Outlook,” *Migration and Development Brief #24*, <https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1288990760745/MigrationandDevelopmentBrief24.pdf> (accessed December 2016).

69 President Rossii, “Встреча с президентами Армении, Белоруссии, Киргизии и Таджикистана” [Meeting with the Presidents of Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan], 8 May 2014, <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/20980> (accessed November 2016).

Division until 2049. Moreover, the space surveillance station “Okno” (window) near the city of Nurek is run by Russian Aerospace Defence Forces. In addition, Russia was seeking access to the Tajikistan’s Ayni military airport close to Dushanbe, for which India tried to get access several times by spending 70 mln USD for its renovation. The Russian 201st Motor Rifle Division uses this airport when needed.

In turn, Uzbekistan’s MoFA in its statement raised concerns over the territorial integrity of Ukraine, while calling for both Ukraine and Russia to engage in dialogue for a resolution.⁷⁰ The deceased Uzbek President Karimov was an independent-minded and apparently unpredictable person to deal with. Later, he criticized the signing of the Eurasian Economic Union agreement between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, questioning the future political independence of the signatories with a direct reference to Russia’s dominance in the Union: “Tell me, can there be political independence without economic independence?”⁷¹ Uzbekistan’s labour migrants work in Russia and about 13% of GDP is based on revenues from them, though Karimov never admitted that migration to Russia was a problem.

At that time Uzbekistan had good ties with its Western partners and profited from the withdrawal of the NATO/ISAF troops at the end of 2014 by offering its territory for military bases of the Western countries for enormous rentals.⁷² Before his death, Karimov legally banned the presence of foreign military in the country after Germany closed its Uzbek military base in 2015. His unexpected death in September 2016 left analysts guessing what foreign policy course will be taken by his successor Shavkat

70 MFA of the Republic of Uzbekistan. “Позиция Республики Узбекистан по ситуации в Украине и Крымскому вопросу,” [The position of the Republic of Uzbekistan on the situation in Ukraine and the Crimea issue] <http://www.mfa.uz/ru/press/news/2014/03/1525/> (accessed November 2016).

71 RFE/RL, «Ислам Каримов против Евразес» [Islam Karimov is Against Eurasian Economic Union] <http://rus.ozodi.org/a/25415754.html> (accessed November 2016).

72 Note: *The government of Uzbekistan frequently increased the payment for Termez military base used by Germans. The last decision about the increment allegedly was one of the reasons to shut the German base in Uzbekistan’s territory.*

For more info: RFE/RL. “Германия решила закрыть свою базу в Термезе” [Germany decided to close down its base in Termez], <http://www.ozodlik.org/a/27308224.html> (accessed December 2016).

Mirziyoev, who became the second President of Uzbekistan in December 2016. Russia's Prime Minister Dmitriy Medvedev took part in the funeral of Karimov, which was a sign of friendship and respect for Central Asians. Later Putin, reportedly to influence internal decisions, himself visited Karimov's grave and had a face to face meeting with Uzbekistan's then Acting President Shavkat Mirziyoev. Mirziyoev was in Karimov's team for many years and served as a Prime Minister of Uzbekistan. Surprisingly, Mirziyoev immediately opened doors of cooperation with neighbouring Central Asian states, in contrast with the isolationism of his predecessor. This was positively perceived at regional level. For instance, after more than twenty years of hostile relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Tashkent re-established direct flights between the capitals and sent delegations. Currently, the focus is on a good-neighbourhood policy approach. The new President's reforms are sending positive signals to some Western countries. However, Uzbek policy on military issues sends a less positive message in a number of respects – e.g., non-participation in any military block, refusal to host any foreign military contingent on Uzbek territory or to deploy its troops abroad. Mirziyoev will arguably keep a balanced approach on cooperation with Russia, the U.S. and China, while boosting economic cooperation with the latter only.

Self-isolated Turkmenistan never took a stand on the Ukraine crisis, using its neutrality doctrine to avoid world politics. Home to a 4% Russian minority, Turkmenistan abstained from voting in the General Assembly on the territorial integrity of Ukraine.⁷³ Thanks to its neutrality doctrine, Ashgabat is not compelled to be a member of any military or political Russian-led organizations like the Eurasian Economic Union, the Collective Security Treaty Organization or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, while it has developed a partnership with NATO and allowed use of its territory as a supply route for ISAF/NATO efforts in Afghanistan.

Overall, the reaction of the Central Asian states to the Ukraine crisis

73 Uguloy Mukhtorova, "The Effect of Ukraine Crisis in Tajikistan."

was merely a reflection of Russia's influence in the region. On the one hand, Russia's aggressive behaviour has challenged the Central Asian leaders to think about their future, and what happens if they aggravate the Kremlin and cautiously project their foreign policy towards the West, especially the U.S. On the other hand, the Ukraine crisis to some extent damaged their trust in their *big brother* (usually the phrase used to refer to Russia) and made them cautiously diversify their foreign policy – which to some extent explains the multi-vector policy of all Central Asian states.

Russia in Syria and Afghanistan: what is Central Asia's Role?

Central Asia is challenged by terrorism and extremism threats, both from inside and outside. However, not all security threats come from Afghanistan, as is usually highlighted by the officials. There are other internal and regional problems within Central Asia itself. There is huge internal dissatisfaction over policies and repressive measures taken by what are often perceived as autocratic leaders at domestic level. Among others, corruption, poverty, political violence and lack of opportunities are all factors. According to anecdotal estimates there are between 2000 to 4000⁷⁴ (or more) fighters from Central Asia participating in Middle Eastern battles, particularly in Syria. There are no exact statistics about citizens joining the ranks of radical groups, including the so-called Islamic State (IS). However, the trend shows that many Central Asian citizens have joined IS while spending time as migrant labourers in Russia. Moreover, Central Asian citizens were involved in the recent terror attacks in Stockholm, Istanbul (airport and nightclub) and St. Petersburg.⁷⁵ In addition, some believe that fighters trained in Middle East battles might join the combatants in Afghanistan after being defeated in the Middle East, and may later return to their homes.

Since 2001, when GWoT started, Central Asian leaders have been

74 International Crisis Group, "Tajikistan Early Warning: Internal Pressures, External Threats," *Europe and Central Asia Briefing No.78*, Bishkek/Brussels, 11 January 2016.

75 Ely Karmon, "Central Asian Jihadists in the Front Line," <https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2075/Central%20Asian%20Jihadists> (accessed September 2017).

actively cooperating with NATO member countries on counter-terrorism. Many western-sponsored projects and initiatives on countering terrorism and violent extremism have been implemented, where Central Asian governments felt a sense of belonging.

In 2015, after two weeks of the Russia-led operation in Syria, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) meeting was held in Moscow, with the presidents of all Central Asian republics participating. Putin called on the post-Soviet participants to reinforce their cooperation to defeat IS:

“According to various estimates, there are already from five up to seven thousands natives of Russia and other CIS fighting for ISIS. And we certainly cannot allow them to use the gained experience in Syria later use at our home.”⁷⁶

He called the situation in Afghanistan “critical” and stated that one of the expansionist aims of different radical groups active in Afghanistan is to penetrate to Central Asia:

“One of their goals is to break into the Central Asian region. It is important to be ready to consistently respond to such a scenario.”⁷⁷

Given that, Moscow made it clear to the Central Asian states that they have to stay with Russia and thus justify its involvement in Syria and help Moscow as required; otherwise the IS will be knocking on the Central Asian states’ doors very soon. Since then, the Russian media have been portraying their troops effectively fighting against IS in contrast to the Western coalition. Certainly, Russia is vulnerable to the threat of IS and overall terrorism in its territory and its backyard, Central Asia. For instance, a young man from Kyrgyzstan was involved in the St. Petersburg metro attack in April 2017. Moreover, the presence of IS on the doorstep

76 President Rossii. “Заседание Совета глав государств СНГ” [Council of CIS Heads of State Meeting]. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50515>

77 *Ibid.*

of Central Asia could be worrisome, especially given that IMU leader Usman Gazi reportedly pledged loyalty to Al-Baghdadi in 2015.⁷⁸ However, the Russian media has to some extent exaggerated the nature of the threat of the self-proclaimed IS in Afghanistan and developed a narrative of possible spillover effects to Central Asia to justify Moscow's operation in Syria. Creating a sense of fear about a threat to Central Asia may make regional governments more accommodating. Secondly, this would enhance Moscow's credibility vis-à-vis NATO and the United States, whom Russia sees as the locomotive of NATO. Moscow always criticizes the West for its failure in Afghanistan, where the expectations of Central Asian governments and Russia from NATO/ISAF remained unfulfilled.⁷⁹ Hence Moscow's interest in proving that Central Asian governments could rely only on Russia, which sees Afghanistan as a part of the Eurasian region, meaning that no outside states or organizations could save the region: "...neither the Americans nor NATO will not do the job for us," said Special Envoy of Russian President to Afghanistan-Zamir Kabulov.⁸⁰

The recent controversial statement by a Russian diplomat on Russian cooperation with the Taliban was worrisome. Zamir Kabulov stated that "[The] Taliban in Afghanistan are fighting with the same fighters [meant IS], whom Russia is bombing in Syria. Thus, our interests coincide." He did not reject rumours that Russia is communicating with the Taliban, saying that there is reason to bring them to an agreement on a ceasefire and ending the war, but not clarifying on which level contacts are maintained.⁸¹ This statement has been harshly criticized by the Afghan

78 RFE/RL, "ИДУ самоликвидировалось, его боевики примкнули к ИГ" [IMU is self-liquidated and its fighters joined the IS] <http://www.ozodlik.org/a/27174697.html> (accessed November 2016).

79 Ivan Safranchuk, "Russia: unfulfilled expectations," *Vox Collegii* vol 6, NATO Defense College, Rome, January 2013.

80 RiaNovosti, "МИД: тема сотрудничества НАТО и ОДКБ закрыта, и не по вине РФ" [MFA: NATO and CSTO cooperation topic is closed, and no fault of the Russian Federation] <https://ria.ru/world/20150825/1206121490.html> (accessed November 2016).

81 RFE/RL, "Вокуниши тунди Кобул баизхороти Кобулов дар бораи Толибон" [Kabulov's Statement provoked tough reaction of Kabul], <http://www.ozodi.org/a/kabul-reaction-to-russian-official-statement-about-taliban/28122331.html> (accessed November 2016).

MoFA, stating that “any attempt to establish contact or support the groups who commit terror attacks against people in Afghanistan, will turn into the threat for whole region in a long-term perspective ...”⁸² It is an unusual declaration about Moscow’s desire to establish contacts with its old enemies from the Soviet-Afghan war in the 1980s. Recently, General Curtis Scaparrotti, NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe, stated that Russia is helping the Taliban.⁸³ Russia is back in Afghanistan and some argue that Moscow wants to take a leading role in resolving the protracted Afghan crisis. Since early 2017, Moscow has organized peace talks on Afghanistan, inviting regional players China, Pakistan, India and Iran to a first round without Afghanistan. Kabul, the U.S. and Central Asian states were invited to the April round, with Washington refusing to participate. Russia uses “hybrid diplomacy”⁸⁴ in Afghanistan, demonstrating its leadership/role in the region to the U.S. Moreover, the fifth round of talks on the Syrian crisis, sponsored by Russia, Turkey and Iran, are to be continued in Astana, Kazakhstan in parallel with the Syrian crisis discussion in Geneva. Time will tell whether these initiatives will generate an outcome, but one is already clear: Russia will, in any case, not give up its influence over the Central Asia region.

82 *Ibid.*

83 See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghanistan-russia-idUSKBN16U234>

84 DW, “Гибридная дипломатия Москвы в Афганистане” [Hybrid diplomacy of Russian in Afghanistan]. <http://www.dw.com/ru/гибридная-дипломатия-москвы-в-афганистане/a-36482510> [accessed on July 2017]

HOW NATO AND CENTRAL ASIA ADAPT TO NEW REALITIES

Central Asian states are adapting to new realities by diversifying their foreign policy and seeking new partners. To the extent that the West distances itself from the region, Central Asia will be tighten up with Russia and China. These countries are geographically closer and have a status quo view on the frequent human rights violations in the region, which comforts Central Asian autocrats. China is one of the main raising partners of Central Asia. Beijing has increased its footprint in a region by offering long-term loans and security assistance. For instance, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan's external debts come primarily from China. Besides the China-led Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO), another platform is the "One Belt, One Road" Initiative, which is worth US\$40 billion also gives a feeling of belonging to the region's states. Beijing is also taking advantage of the situation and promoting its interest in the region, which is a separate topic of discussion.⁸⁵

As a part of its "remunerative" power in Central Asia, Russia provides technical military support, especially to poor countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. In April 2014 Russian Defence Deputy Minister Anatoly Antonov stated Moscow's promises on no-strings military and technical assistance to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, equal to US\$411 million;⁸⁶ in November 2016, the Russian Defence Minister announced that Moscow will large numbers of military planes and helicopters to Dushanbe.⁸⁷ These two countries are also among the main beneficiaries of the security

85 EurasiaNetOrg, "Don't worry, Russia: China's not starting 'Central Asian NATO,'" <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/78136> (accessed October 2016).

86 *Asia Plus*, "Russia to provide military hardware to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan"; <http://news.tj/en/news/russia-provide-military-hardware-tajikistan-and-kyrgyzstan> (accessed November 2016).

87 Iskandari Firuz, "Русия ба Тоҷикистон ҳавопаймову ҷарҳболҳои ҷангӣ медиҳад" [Russia will give military plane and helicopters to Tajikistan] *RFE*, <http://www.ozodi.org/a/russia-will-provide-military-place-helicopters-tajikistan-/28149616.html> (accessed November 2016).

assistance of the U.S. in the region. As an interlocutor from the Defence Ministry of Tajikistan says, Russia provides old-fashioned hardware left from the Soviet period, not often used in Russia's defence, thus preventing the beneficiaries from closer co-operation with others.⁸⁸

Regional Security: Central Asia between Dragon and Bear?

For provision of regional security, there is no solid organization with a proven record on a rapid reaction in case of crisis. However, following the activities of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), one could argue that these organizations became more active in the last few years. This might change the security dynamics in the region. The SCO, which fights the three “evils” of terrorism, extremism, and separatism, was created in 1996. Uzbekistan joined in 2001; in June 2017, membership was extended to India and Pakistan. The SCO offers a bigger platform for dialogue to its members than the CSTO. It is believed that the organization was established to counter-balance U.S. and NATO influence in Central Asia. Though considered an economic, political and military organization, until recently the SCO was active only in promoting economic issues. Its military objectives have now been reactivated. The SCO platform brings together China and Russia, alongside all the Central Asian states except Turkmenistan (which has observer status). Turkey has also expressed interest in membership. Iran has attempted to join several times, but China is unlikely to agree, despite Russia's vouching for Tehran after sanctions were lifted from Iran. The SCO has a brighter future than the CSTO. In addition, China promotes bilateral relations with the region's countries. Now China is becoming involved in the security field by providing assistance in border security,⁸⁹ where the European Union and

88 Anonymous Interview with Tajik defense sector official, Dushanbe, August 2016.

89 Abdullo Ahsurov, “Чин дар марзи Тоҷикистону Афғонистон 7 иншооти низомӣ месозад” [China is building 7 military infrastructure in Tajik-Afghan borders] <http://www.ozodi.org/a/china-tajik-afghan-border/28012657.html> (accessed October 2016).

OSCE always used to implement the largest projects. The beneficiaries of Chinese assistance are mainly Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Beijing reportedly wanted to establish an alliance between China, Tajikistan and Pakistan, which was immediately labelled as a future “Central Asian NATO” by the media.⁹⁰ Later, it was clarified by the Chinese that this project will be complementary to the SCO’s Tashkent-based anti-terrorism structure (RATS).

Since the deterioration of Russia-NATO relations and the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the CSTO has launched numerous trainings and initiatives. This was a time for Russia to denounce the partnership of the Central Asian governments with NATO and justify the *raison d'être* of the CSTO. The organization was founded in 1992, but its Charter was signed only in 2002. The idea was to create a security bloc to retain the alliance of post-Soviet. The member states are Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. Turkmenistan has never had membership in the CSTO due to its neutrality policy, while Uzbekistan left the organization in 1999 and rejoined it in 2006 when its relations with the West deteriorated over the massacre in Andijan in 2005. Tashkent abandoned the CSTO again in 2012 after its relations improved with Europe and North America. Georgia and Azerbaijan withdrew from the CSTO in 1999 and have never rejoined. Afghanistan and Serbia have observer status.

The organization was dysfunctional for many years and was seeking to establish relations with NATO on stabilization of Afghanistan to gain international importance. However, these attempts were not perceived as serious by the Alliance and some argue that it was the U.S. that blocked them. The creation of the CSTO was already paradoxical for the Alliance and its interests; in addition, the values and interests of this organization do not correspond to those of NATO; the CSTO is politically fragmented and its member states are militarily fragile and member states most of the

90 EurasiaNet.Org. “Don’t worry, Russia: China’s not starting ‘Central Asian NATO,’” <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/78136> (accessed October 2016).

time rely on Russia to do the job. The organization has proved to be ineffective during conflicts on the territory of its member states. Many argue that it failed during the crisis in Southern Kyrgyzstan, while the organization stated that its mandate does not include involvement in members' internal conflicts. In 2014, Sergey Lavrov said that NATO persistently refused Russia's proposals to establish working relations with the CSTO in the last ten years; he spoke of this as a "natural alliance," with "NATO providing the 'backbone' of the forces that operate within Afghanistan and the CSTO regularly conducting anti-drug and anti-terrorist operations along the outer perimeter of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan IRA limits."⁹¹ Later the same year, the CSTO's Secretary General announced that had stopped trying to establish ties with NATO.⁹²

As another sign of its activation, the CSTO increased joint military exercises along with its Central Asian members, who also participate in NATO's Steppe Eagle exercises every year. Right after NATO's Warsaw Summit, the CSTO military training was conducted in the Pskov oblast, which borders Estonia and Latvia, with participation of 5,000 Russian soldiers plus 1,000 from other member countries. Regional analyst Joshua Kucera noticed some new twists in these trainings. For the first time, Russia's ambassador to NATO Alexander Grushko was observing the training: "Obviously, in the situation where NATO countries are pursuing a course of military containment of Russia, we have to undertake efforts to ensure that Russia's safety is secured,"⁹³ he told journalists during the press conference. The exercise was based on a possible scenario of NATO invasion.

91 MFA of Russian Federation, «Выступление Министра иностранных дел России С.В. Лаврова на открытой лекции по актуальным вопросам внешней политики Российской Федерации», Москва, 20 октября 2014 года [Speech by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov at Open Lecture on Topical Issues of the Russia's Foreign Policy] http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/716270

92 "ОДКБ отказалось налаживать диалог НАТО" [CSTO refused to dialogue with NATO] http://rusnext.ru/third_world/1415269842 (accessed November 2016).

93 "ОДКБ отказалось налаживать диалог НАТО" [CSTO refused to dialogue with NATO] http://rusnext.ru/third_world/1415269842 (accessed November 2016).

Moreover, the CSTO announced that it would hold discussions with the UN on conducting peacekeeping operations beyond its borders.⁹⁴ After several rounds of talks devoted to the Syrian crisis, there was a decision to establish four de-escalation zones in Syria, where the guarantor states – Russia, Turkey and Iran – should be sending troops to observe the designated territories. Media reported that Moscow was negotiating with CSTO members Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to send their troops to Syria. Kyrgyz President and Kazakh Foreign Minister immediately denied the statements, referring to the absence of a UN resolution.⁹⁵ The discussions over sending peacekeeping forces to Syria from the CSTO member states date back to the beginnings of Russia's involvement in Syria. At that time, the CSTO Secretary General told media that “there is no need yet.”⁹⁶ The CSTO used to have such exercises, but the first simulation exercise on peacekeeping under the UN mandate was held in Belarus, in 2016. Thus, Russia's messages about further development of these activities are not consistent with the Central Asian states' willingness to engage in these missions. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are not in the list, because they are not members of the CSTO and have also ruled out the deployment of their troops abroad. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are very fragile and do not have a professional army. Only Kazakhstan has brigades (Kazgbrig, Kazbat) envisioned for peacekeeping operations under a UN mandate. Astana's decision to take part in ISAF mission was blocked by its Senate, allegedly from fear of Taliban reprisals. It is unlikely that any of the five Central Asian CSTO member states will get involved in any operation abroad in the near term.

94 Joshua Kucera, “Is the CSTO Preparing for Peacekeeping in Syria?” EurasianetOrg. <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/80791> (accessed November 2016).

95 Vladimir Mukhin, “Союзники Москвы по ОДКБ не желают воевать в Сир” [Moscow's allies on CSTO do not have a desire to fight in Syria] http://www.ng.ru/world/2017-06-26/1_7015_syria.html (accessed July 2017).

96 Joshua Kucera, “Is the CSTO Preparing for Peacekeeping in Syria?”

Why Should NATO Stay Engaged with Central Asia?

Many policy-makers might question the value of Central Asia for the Alliance and ask “Why do we need Central Asia?” or, at most, “Do we have a limited role to play in that region, located far away from our borders?” Such questions were raised during interviews with regional experts, who could not see a future of deeper engagement by NATO in the region. Both arguments are valid in from a short-term perspective; however, thus might create a policy shortfall in the long term.

There are good reasons for NATO to stay engaged with Central Asia: a) to fulfil the goal of the signed PfP agreements; b) to help the governments of Central Asia to balance with Russia and China and stay engaged, sharing the European security context and international standards; c) to provide the security of the Euro-Atlantic zone by being proactive in potential conflicts.

Effective Co-operative Security?

The genuine goal of the established PfP was to intensify the cooperation between member states and NATO and subsequently prepare future candidate countries for accession. It was not, and is not, fully relevant to Central Asian partners. But cooperative security is the most pertinent goal to stay engaged with Central Asian states, and has implications for the security of Euro-Atlantic zone. As rightly stated by the former SecGen of NATO, Lord Robertson:

“Europe cannot be fully secure or realise its own potential, if the Central Asian countries are left out of the equation.”⁹⁷

Therefore, it should be the kernel for future engagement of the Alliance in the region. The cooperation established since the 1990s, and strengthened in the last fifteen years during NATO’s active engagement

⁹⁷ See NATO online library: <http://www.nato.int/docu/newspage/2000/n000714e.htm> (accessed November 2016).

with the Central Asian states, should be used in the future instead of burning bridges now and re-building them if a future need arises.

Partners in Balancing Russia on its Southern Flank

The Central Asian states have been striving to maintain full independence since the USSR collapsed, but a shortage of resources and capacity keeps them in a non-privileged position. Since they do not possess resources, at least they could use the engagement of different actors to boost their ability “... to pursue their policy interest independent of the big players.”⁹⁸ Central Asian states have exploited nationalistic rhetoric to develop their national identity separate from Russia and thus articulate their detachment from the “colonial” Russian references,⁹⁹ while seeking other allies based on their new identity. Otherwise, all efforts made over more than twenty years by the West to assist in establishing strong, independent and democratic states in the region will prove to have been in vain.

Repercussions of Instability in Central Asia on NATO's Security

The region is vulnerable to potential conflicts, both domestic and regional.

There is always potential for inter-state conflicts over border issues (Uzbekistan vs. Kyrgyzstan; Kyrgyzstan vs. Tajikistan)(UZB vs. KG; KG vs. TJK) and water resources (between downstream and upstream countries: UZB vs. TJK and KG). The escalation of tensions between Kyrgyz and Tajik border guards last year, which left some injured, is evidence for that. The West needs a stable Central Asia.

The course of domestic policy may be observed as getting worse in

98 Katja Gercak, “NATO in Central Asia: In Search of Regional Harmony,” Turkish Policy Quarterly Vol 6, No. 2, 2007.

99 Francesc Serra Massansalvador, “The process of Nation Building in Central Asia and its Relationship to Russia's Regional Influence,” Volume 10. No.5, 2010.

several regional states, where central authorities appear to be consolidating power and preparing for power transition, while repressing the opposition and dissidents. The refugee flow from Central Asia to Europe in case of internal conflict could be a possible scenario. For instance, the number of refugees and political asylum seekers from Tajikistan to Europe, in particularly, Poland and Germany, has increased over the past two years due to the political situation. Some 660 Tajiks sought asylum in Poland in the first half of 2016, which surpasses the total of 527 applicants in 2015 and 105 in 2014¹⁰⁰ and these numbers are increasing. They do not go to post-Soviet countries, fearing extradition to face ill treatment and torture. It might not seem serious numbers in comparison with refugees from other countries, however it should compel in considering the future consequence.

Corruption, poor economic conditions, absence of jobs at home and in Russia (due to the economic crisis) and lack of opportunities make many people vulnerable to recruitment by terrorist organizations, such as IS. This region is very vulnerable to terrorism/extremism, which has a history there. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Jamaat Ansarullah terrorist groups were established by Central Asian citizens, who are still sheltered in Pakistan's tribal area. The IMU is fragmented, but one wing of this organization is following the Taliban and half of them pledged loyalty to IS after the death of Taliban leader Mullah Umar.¹⁰¹ The borders of the region are not protected well due to its landscape. States like Tajikistan do not possess full control over their own borders in the mountainous area bordering Afghanistan. For instance, in 2010 a small group of terrorists penetrated Tajikistan, where dozens died in a clash with military forces.¹⁰² If the IS break down in Syria, the new safe

100 Yan Matusevich, "The Quiet Tajik Refugee Crisis," *The Diplomat*, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/08/the-quiet-tajik-refugee-crisis/> (accessed November 2016).

101 <http://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-islamic-movement-uzbekistan-fractured/27395160.html>

102 Note: Tajik Islamists militants along with Chechens and Afghans penetrated to Eastern of Tajikistan in 2010. They have attacked to Tajik MoD convoy killing 28 soldiers, where many were freshmen and it showed how Tajikistan is weak militarily. See: http://www.rferl.org/a/Tajikistan_Blames_Islamist_Militants_For_Attack/2162831.html

haven for IS could be within Afghanistan, or some could return to their homes. The suicide attack against the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek,¹⁰³ which left at least two people injured, shootings in Kazakh cities Almaty and Aktobe¹⁰⁴ and frequent attack warnings in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan issued by the UK/US Embassies¹⁰⁵ show that the security situation is not as stable as it seems. Moreover, there is concern that Central Asian citizens might become exporters of extremism and terrorism to Europe, following recent terrorist attacks in Sweden, Turkey and Russia.

As rightly mentioned by Richard E. Hoagland, former US principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs:

“Western governments need to engage in Central Asia precisely to ensure that it does *not* become a trouble zone and to ensure that, over time, it becomes more firmly embedded in the community of responsible nations.”¹⁰⁶

103 Joshua Kucera, “Central Asia: Measuring the Geopolitical Impact of the Bishkek Bombing,” *EurasiaNet.Org*. <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/80371> (accessed October 2016).

104 See more: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/kazakhstan-17-killed-series-extremist-attacks-160606105755961.html>

105 Catherine Putz, “US, UK Embassies Issue Terror Warning for Kyrgyzstan,” *The Diplomat*. <http://thediplomat.com/2016/10/us-uk-embassies-issue-terror-warning-for-kyrgyzstan/> (accessed October 2016).

106 Richard E. Hoagland. “Central Asia: Not In Our Backyard, Not A Hot Spot, Strategically Important,” CIGI, https://www.cigionline.org/sites/default/files/cigi_paper_no.87web.pdf (accessed November 2016).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there are a few suggestions for further engagement with NATO's Central Asian partners:

Identify strategy or policy objectives: It is time for NATO to identify its strategy or policy objectives in Central Asia, if there are any.¹⁰⁷ The Alliance's engagement in Afghanistan should not frame NATO's strategy in the region, but instead the PfP should serve as a main basis for further engagement. NATO could possibly involve all Central Asian states and Afghanistan in discussion of regional security. Border security and counter-terrorism are special areas of interest for all. Central Asian states are not engaged in a process of Afghanistan crisis resolution. All of them should not be necessarily antagonistic to Russia and China, but should establish common ground and thus give a sense of belonging to each party.

Redefine approaches: NATO should redefine its approach to its partners in Central Asia. Currently, the individual partners are free to choose how and in which areas they wish to cooperate, based on their respective needs, and it is their responsibility to reach out to the Alliance and not vice versa. This approach does not always work in the case of Central Asian states, due to bureaucratic and political factors. Not all PfP members have a military attaché in Brussels. NATO should therefore be more proactive in defining the contours of the individual partnerships. Moreover, it should be identified whether a bottom-up or top-down approach is the best way to increase the effectiveness of PfP cooperation in the region.

Keep an eye on the ground: A ground presence is always more effective than remote desk research. There is no need for a military presence in Central Asia, but diplomatic missions will be more efficient. For Central Asian states, it would be easier to reach out to the Tashkent office

107 Interview with the Western diplomat, Dushanbe, August 2016.

rather than Brussels. For NATO, it will be much easier to monitor the developments of the region and collect information on the ground, which enables NATO to have early warning, prevention and maybe even a response. An individual NATO member state mission abroad may often serve as a Contact Point Embassy (CPE) for Alliance liaison in a given country. If the idea of a NATO liaison office in the region is no longer feasible, then NATO should consider a regional CPE on a rotating basis for coordination of Central Asia PfP activities. The reaction towards NATO's increased cooperation with the region most of the time depends on who is leading the initiative. As mentioned above, the increased U.S. presence is sometimes perceived "with suspicion"¹⁰⁸ by regional powers. Therefore, it would appear more prudent to nominate another member state as CPE—for instance, a French or German Embassy. France used to keep its contingent in Tajikistan and never had an issue, while Germany was in Uzbekistan for many years, even after the Andijan massacre in 2005, while the U.S. was requested to leave immediately. Kazakhstan could be the host for a rotating CPE in the region. Astana is a relatively active PfP state of the region and has vast experience of cooperation with NATO. It also has balanced relations with other regional powers due to its relatively economic independence, and will not have major issues in hosting a CPE. It is highly recommended for NATO to better coordinate some activities with EU delegations in the region and OSCE, which has a presence in all five countries concerned. For instance, this could be done in public diplomacy, border management, or law enforcement training. In some areas, they might benefit from contacts maintained by OSCE and EU delegations.

Educate, train and promote understanding, interoperability and values

The image of passivity attached to the Alliance is a result of the PfP

108 Katja Gerçek, "NATO in Central Asia: In Search of Regional Harmony," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* Vol 6, No. 2. 2007.

not fully working in the region. In turn, the perception of NATO as a U.S.-led organisation is somehow misleading and needs to be clarified. The attitude towards the Alliance could be improved by investing in the region's security and military education. The Alliance's approach via training and courses is essential. However, one or two language courses per year for officers can do very little. The training should be regular, coherent and sustainable. First, the diplomats who serve as focal points for PFP activities in their respective ministries and embassies should be annually trained on the work of the Alliance and the best use of the menu of activities. The number of language courses organized for officers should be increased. Military exercises similar to Steppe Eagle should be held more than once per annum, and all the region's representatives should be invited, which would contribute to building a network between them. Training border guards on border management/security would be a good idea. The Central Asian states' armed forces, in particularly those of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, are old-fashioned, fragile, and vulnerable to corruption. To modernize the armies is a very difficult task, and requires considerable resources. Therefore, NATO programmes like DEEP and Building Integrity should be launched in all five countries, at least to initiate military reforms. The activities conducted in the framework of the PFP need publicity via local media outlets in the region. The number of conferences and summer schools for youth convened as part of public diplomacy activities should be increased on a regular basis – at least two per year at a domestic level, and one at a regional level. UN and OSCE courses are widely known amongst youth in Central Asia. Organizing NATO courses would help to raise young people's awareness of the Alliance.

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