

How to get out of Afghanistan: NATO's withdrawal through Central Asia

by Heidi Reisinger¹

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NATO Defense College
Research Division
Via Giorgio Pelosi, 1
00143 Rome – Italy
web site: www.ndc.nato.int
e-mail: research@ndc.nato.int

Imprimerie Deltamedia Group
Via Portuense 1555, 00148 Rome, Italy
www.deltamedia.it

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NATO's decision to withdraw combat troops from Afghanistan has forced the Alliance to think long and hard about the "how" associated with such a withdrawal. As a result the strategic importance of the five Central Asian states Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, a politically neglected region, mostly seen as a supplier of raw materials and energy, is likely to increase significantly. During the past ten years the ISAF mission has focused its attention on Afghanistan itself. The only neighbouring country taken into serious consideration has been Pakistan, as emblematically shown in the US AfPak policy approach. North of Afghanistan, the Central Asian states have been left on the sidelines and their strategic and political role has been underestimated. However, they are now back on the political agenda as an indispensable transit ground.

US, UK, German and French cabinet ministers have visited the Central Asian partners frequently in recent months to negotiate alternative solutions for transit routes into and out of Afghanistan. In addition, Central Asian officials were on the guest list of the recently held Chicago Summit in May 2012, where US Defense Secretary Panetta "expressed his deep appreciation" to them.²

This shift of attention stems mainly from the deterioration of relations with Pakistan. Some years ago NATO states began to realize that Pakistan had become more and more a part of the problem rather than the solution. The culmination of this was Islamabad's closure of NATO supply routes to Afghanistan after 26 November 2011, when 24 Pakistani soldiers were accidentally killed by the US military. As a result, planners were forced to send more cargo into Afghanistan via alternative routes. NATO has since then freighted more than half its non-lethal cargo through Central Asia by land, while the rest has been flown in cost-intensively on cargo planes.

Even in the event of the easier and more efficient southern supply routes through Pakistan being reopened to NATO cargo, ground transit routes through Central Asia will still be indispensable when the time comes to withdraw huge amounts of equipment. It has been estimated that if the containers needed to freight all this material were placed end to end, they would form a line almost as long as the distance from Berlin to Paris. The shift of attention, and maybe also a political shift, towards Central Asia - and especially Uzbekistan - will thus continue. The withdrawal of cargo

¹ Heidi Reisinger is a Research Adviser at the NATO Defense College. The views expressed in this paper are the responsibility of the author, and do not necessarily reflect those of the NATO Defense College or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The author would like to thank Gemma Pörzgen, Executive Director of the Uzbekistan Press Freedom Group (which publishes the newssite www.uznews.net), for her collaboration.

² David S. Cloud and Kathleen Hennessey, Obama's Pakistan gamble fails to pay off, Los Angeles Times, 22 May 2012.



will coincide with a withdrawal of criticism, as concerns about poor human rights records move into the background, and transit agreements to the fore.

This paper tries to shed light on the question why it is so difficult for NATO to withdraw from landlocked Afghanistan mainly, or partly, through its northern neighbourhood – a neighbourhood characterized by strained relations among the states, which are internally challenged with diverse governance issues and which, in two cases, have developed into true dictatorships. A complex situation is met by a complex task: as NATO's approach to logistics is challenging in itself, and therefore a knotty starting point from which to operate in a region such as Central Asia. The paper also examines why the withdrawal from Afghanistan is not only a political, but also a technical and financial challenge involving huge costs for NATO and its member states.

For NATO, withdrawing from Afghanistan and having to deal with Central Asia is a practical challenge with geopolitical implications. The prospect also raises the question of the Alliance's long-term strategy towards Central Asia. Today there seems to be no alternative to close cooperation, but what is the outlook for the engagement after 2014? NATO's interest in the whole region might drop drastically.

This raises the question as to what has been done to date. Neither the Central Asian states nor NATO have made optimal use of the past ten years, a period in which Central Asia's southern flank has been made secure by coalition forces. The international community has focused too much on military action and concentrated all its efforts on Afghanistan, not acknowledging that peaceful and prosperous development there has to be embedded in a regional context.

Afghanistan's northern neighbourhood

In the early stages of the international military engagement in Afghanistan, the Central Asian countries became critically important to the Western world. The US and its allies urgently needed partners and logistic assistance in Afghanistan's neighbourhood.

Three Central Asian states – Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – share a common border with Afghanistan. The 137-km Uzbek-Afghan border is the shortest, but plays a critical role for ISAF transit. Turkmenistan shares a 744-km border with Afghanistan; this border was the focus of considerable attention and investment after an increase in narco-trafficking problems, related to the rising power of the Taliban.

The destabilizing effect of the situation in Afghanistan is most evident in Tajikistan, with which it shares more than 1,300 km of border. Crossing wild mountainous areas which are almost impossible to control, this is not only Afghanistan's longest

border with a northern neighbour but is also one of the main routes for Afghan drug trafficking. For Tajikistan the problem is twofold: the immediate danger of becoming a narco-state – it relies heavily on the drug trade – and also its plight as a consumers' market. In addition, the border area offers excellent cover for fighters and extremist groups.

Experts see Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the latter of which does not share a border with Afghanistan, as the least stable states in Central Asia. Both are endangered not only by the trade in illegal drugs, but also by the spread of violence and the growing influence of Islamist groups. Kyrgyzstan went through a serious internal crisis and a long phase of instability, climaxing with the unrest in the southern region of Osh in the summer of 2010. At the same time, successive Kyrgyz governments have tried hard to develop a more liberal and democratic state system than those of neighbouring states.

Kazakhstan, like Kyrgyzstan, does not border Afghanistan. In terms of economic activity, wealth and the degree of freedom enjoyed by its population, it has shown the best development in the region. From a Western perspective it has also played a remarkably active role in its foreign policy. Astana tried hard to convince the international community to recognize its responsibility as Chair of the OSCE in 2010. While it is thought by some to have fulfilled this duty mostly as a regime-stabilizing exercise, it is at least one of the few countries in the region that tries to shape common security decisions together with Russia and NATO.³ Kazakhstan was the only Central Asian country to consider sending a military contingent to ISAF, in 2010. However, after the Taliban threatened "negative consequences", Astana did not want to take the risk and cancelled the proposed undertaking.⁴ In 2011 it held the presidency of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and continued to back Russian initiatives to raise Afghanistan's role within the organization. (Since 2005 the SCO has run an Afghanistan contact group, in order to support Afghan integration into regional economic structures). Last but not least, Astana chaired the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of the Islamic Conference until June 2012.

Turkmenistan, which could be Afghanistan's most important neighbour in the north, has proved a difficult partner to deal with. There was some hope that the new president, Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, would launch a comprehensive political and social transition. But the self-styled "Protector" has proclaimed the "Era of Might and Happiness" in his country and has fostered a bizarre personality cult similar to that of his predecessor, Saparmurat Niyazov. Neither the country's human rights record nor the living conditions for ordinary Turkmen have improved – the country is still considered to be one of "the worst of the worst", in the words of the international human rights monitoring group Freedom House.⁵

³ See Andrea Schmitz/Esther Somfalvy, *Falsche Erwartungen*, SWP-Aktuell 9, February 2011.

⁴ Dilshod Ibromkhimov, *The Role of Neighboring Countries in the Stabilization and Reconstruction of Afghanistan: A View from the Region*, Internal NDC Report, December 2011.

⁵ See <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/worst-worst-2011-worlds-most-repressive-societies>.



Uzbekistan has the largest population in the region (28 million) and was expected after independence in 1991 to become the key state in the region, but it has failed to develop a leading role. Relations with neighbours are tense and there are serious concerns regarding the country's domestic development. Freedom House rates it alongside Turkmenistan as "worst of the worst." However, for NATO Uzbekistan remains the key northern neighbour of Afghanistan for purposes of transit.

Tashkent actually launched one of the very few political initiatives from Central Asia concerning the best approach to dealings with Afghanistan. During the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, President Karimov suggested reviving the UN's Afghanistan 6+2 assembly (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, Iran and China, plus US and Russia) and expanding it to 6+3 by the addition of NATO. Karimov argued that this could help start a process of stabilization and reconstruction in the region. The proposal was an attempt to engage important neighbouring countries which are critical for the development of a "greater Central Asia", but the idea was to talk about - and not with - Afghanistan. It was thus not taken seriously, and seemed above all to serve the interests of Uzbekistan in its aspirations to a leading role within the region.

Back to square one

It is only since 9/11 that Western public opinion has been aware of the problems caused by the Taliban regime, their links to Al-Qaida and their terrorist camps in Afghanistan. Until then it was only when the Taliban blew up the Buddhas of Bamiyan and hundreds of smaller statues in March 2001 that their activities received any public attention in the West, mostly through the culture pages of international newspapers. Human rights groups also tried to call attention to the dramatic plight of Afghan women and children, but generally the barbarity of the Taliban regime was underexposed and the threat it represented was underestimated in the West.

In the Central Asian states, however, everybody was aware of the increasing problems coming from Afghanistan. As far back as the late 90s, there were discussions as to whether it was appropriate for the region to host US military bases for strikes against terrorist training camps in Afghanistan.

US military action in the region at that time actually went quite far. It has often been forgotten that the Clinton administration launched pre-emptive strikes against training sites in Afghanistan (Khost and Jalalabad) on 20 August 1998. This was on the basis of evidence that Osama bin Laden, who had taken refuge in Afghanistan, had been involved in attacks against US installations – especially the bombings of East African embassies in 1998.

Russia too was fully acquainted with the problem of the

terrorist training camps, a subject of particular interest to the Kremlin given the connection between the Taliban and the Chechen fighters.⁶ Moscow – or to be more precise Vladimir Putin, who, in 1999/2000, was embroiled in the outbreak of the second Chechen war – was furious about this liaison between the Islamist militant groups. In addition, Moscow had provided significant support to the Northern Alliance and regarded the growing potential for conflict associated with the situation in Afghanistan as one of the most pressing security threats for Russia and its partners in Central Asia. It also felt responsible for the border security of ex-Soviet states, according to the idea that they were still part of Moscow's "near abroad". Moscow significantly supported – and in the case of Tajikistan maintained – border security for more than a decade after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Until 2005 around 20,000 Russian troops secured the Tajik-Afghan border, a lot more effectively than the national replacements who followed them.⁷

When Russia too announced pre-emptive strikes against terrorist training camps in Afghanistan on 22 May 2000, Western officials and commentators demonstrated serious misinterpretation of the threat emanating from the Taliban regime. They mostly saw Russian action against the Taliban, with understandable scepticism, in the perspective of Moscow's campaign in Chechnya. "We agree that bin Laden is a threat to the region and beyond," a senior Clinton administration official said, "but we believe the Russians should exercise restraint. We don't believe that anything is to be gained by spreading the Chechen war."⁸

Russia did have a serious security problem on its southern flank but the world did not understand this, mostly because of Moscow's misguided communication strategy with its emphasis on opposition to NATO politics – and particularly to NATO's enlargement, presented as a core threat to Russian security. This was actually no more than a political issue which could be likened to a phantom pain, but was foregrounded at the expense of the real threats with which Russia was confronted. It was therefore no surprise when Moscow's announcement that it would go after training camps in Afghanistan was interpreted as a "show of force", an avatar of the traditional Russian concern with spheres of influence, in order to bring the Central Asian states back into line.⁹

This interpretation did not of course take into account the security plight of the newly independent Central Asian states, with their fragments of armed forces that were unable to defend them. Only Kazakhstan felt militarily strong enough and geographically distant enough to be safe. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were in desperate straits. Militarily weak, with secular governments, their own militant Islamist groups and, in the case of Tajikistan, a war-torn society, they

⁶ The Taliban provided financial support, weapons and training to the Chechen fighters and were the only entity to recognize Chechen independence.

⁷ Russian border troops supported by Russia's 201st Division. These 7,000 troops remained in Tajikistan and are Russia's largest force contingent deployed abroad.

⁸ Michael R. Gordon, Russia Warns Afghanistan Not to Aid Rebel Groups, *The New York Times*, 25 May 2000.

⁹ Thomas Avenarius, Moskaus neue Machtgelüste, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 30 May 2000.



were not in a position to counter the Taliban and the related Central Asian militant Islamist movements.

Prior to 9/11 the Central Asian states more or less meandered between a pragmatic leaning towards outreach to the Taliban and guarded attempts to cultivate partnerships against them.

Against this background Turkmenistan tried to appease – or even maintain friendly relations with – the Taliban regime by striking non-political business deals, and by working on the idea that the extremists in Kabul might appreciate the importance of Turkmen resources. The other countries focused more on help from outside. The discussions over whether they would host US military bases to strike against Afghanistan illustrate their dilemma: to avoid becoming the official enemy of the Taliban they were reluctant to align openly with the US, but at the same time they tried to show compliance. The rising power of the Taliban regime, the importance of partnership with the US and the need for a peaceful settlement were clearly identified in 2000 by Askar Aytmatov, Kyrgyzstan's presidential adviser: "Our country is in the front line of the fight against a global danger. [...] We attach great importance to cooperation with the USA in security issues and in military and technical fields as a whole. The USA is an important partner for us in securing peace and stability in the region."¹⁰ Central Asia's appeal for help also reached the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Moscow-led transitional structure which was created after the Soviet breakup but turned out to be mostly a paper tiger. In principle not only the security but also the newly won independence of the Central Asian states was at stake. A Russian newspaper at the time commented: "Better the Russians than the Taliban".¹¹

But the Russians did not come, even when the situation was at its most parlous in the late 90s. Uzbekistan had as far as possible secured its short border with Afghanistan along the Amu Darya River. The checkpoint at the "Friendship Bridge" was closed for several years, and border guards were ordered not to let anybody across the Amu Darya. When Uzbekistan then hosted the first US troops in October 2001, the Taliban immediately reacted with threats of war and by sending fighters to the Afghan-Uzbek border.

The day after the US military campaign in Afghanistan started on 7 October 2001, the Russian newspaper *Izvestiya* compared the date to the beginning of the Second World War and saw no chance of Russia staying out. It predicted geopolitical shifts in Central Asia, and a phase of marked instability in the region.¹²

Predictions can be proved wrong: Russia did not become

significantly involved except for transit arrangements, no major geopolitical shift has materialized so far and, for Central Asia, the past decade has been stable (at least from a military viewpoint).

Central Asia in a limbo: expectations and threats

The Central Asian governments have kept a low profile with regard to security issues related to Afghanistan. After decades of functioning as a marching ground for troops making their way into or out of Afghanistan, it has become engraved in Central Asia's perception that somebody else is in charge of security issues. Problem-solving seems to be the responsibility of Moscow, Washington and Brussels, while Astana, Ashgabat, Tashkent, Dushanbe and Bishkek merely await opportunities to offer deals for the hosting or processing of foreign troops doing the dangerous work in the Afghan provinces.

The competition among NATO countries for cooperation with the Central Asian states, as well as the benefits accruing from the Alliance's engagement through transit fees, maintenance services, labour and infrastructure, might have enforced this perception. Obviously it led local elites to the wrong conclusions: balancing the interests of foreign powers guarantees national autonomy, but does not give any incentives to find solutions for regional security threats.¹³

There is nevertheless widespread awareness throughout the Central Asian region that security problems may arise in this setting, the real worry being the possibility that Afghanistan could once again become a source of cross-border instability. Concerns are growing: will the Afghan National Security Forces be able to maintain security?¹⁴

Uzbek President Karimov stated in a recent speech that "the announced withdrawal of American and ISAF forces from Afghanistan by 2014 could increase the threat of spillover of terrorist and extremist activity, tension and confrontation in this vast region and lead to the emergence here of a permanent source of instability."¹⁵ Similarly, an Uzbek expert has cautioned against the "domino effect of infiltration by terrorist groups from Afghanistan into the northern neighbourhood".¹⁶

To say that Central Asia is back to square one security-wise is to provide an incomplete appraisal, not taking into account that for its northern neighbours the situation in Afghanistan is today maybe more dangerous than before. Afghanistan has never been better equipped and prepared for war. This situation has led the states concerned, with their modest armed forces, to seek Russian or Western support.

¹⁰ Top Kyrgyz aide denies talks with USA on missile strikes against Afghanistan, Interview with Askar Aytmatov in Slovo Kyrgyzstana, 28 November 2000, quoted by BBC Monitoring, 30 November 2000.

¹¹ Aleksey Mironov, Plany Moskvy nikogo ne udivili v Tashkente, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 25 May 2000.

¹² Semen Novoprudsky, Our War, *Izvestiya*, 8 Oktober 2001.

¹³ See Andrea Schmitz, *Beyond Afghanistan*, SWP Comments 10, April 2010, p. 3.

¹⁴ See Thomas Kunze/ Lina Gronau, *Zentralasien: Die Angst vor dem Abzug aus Afghanistan*, Länderbericht der Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 3 November 2011.

¹⁵ <http://www.uzdaily.com/articles-id-17077.htm> and Farkhod Tolipov, Central Asia and Afghanistan after 2014, 18 April 2012, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5756>

¹⁶ Oleg Stolpovskiy to Regnum news agency, 9 April 2012, <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1519006.html>



Against this backdrop Central Asia has failed to achieve geopolitical significance as a region and, more importantly, to establish the effective regional cooperation mechanisms which would be needed to react adequately to the possible dangers emanating from Afghanistan. The region missed the opportunity to transform adequately, and Western influence was unable to persuade the mostly authoritarian governments to modernize their state systems and work together constructively with their neighbours. Each individual country is focused on its own interests, and governments compete with each other. Uzbekistan, in particular, seems to act as a troublemaker. The most worrying confrontation is that between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, with disagreements about border, energy and water issues. One particular source of tension is the Tajik project to build a hydroelectric plant in Rogun.

As a part of a long running exchange of unfriendly action, Tashkent stopped gas delivery to Tajikistan without notification in early April 2012, harming the local economy and contributed to further escalation of the conflict.¹⁷ After a critical railroad connection to Tajikistan was destroyed by an explosion in November 2011, Uzbekistan did not show any appetite to repair the line, which could also play a role for NATO supply lines, and even started dismantling it.¹⁸

Fatal shootings at the Uzbek-Tajik and Uzbek-Kyrgyz borders have further contributed to the cooling of relations. In a recent analysis of the International Crisis Group (ICG), Central Asia is seen as a hotbed of potential manmade disasters that could explode in the coming year. The ICG considers Uzbekistan as a difficult partner in the region and, in terms of transit arrangements, cautions that turning to Uzbekistan as an alternative to Pakistan “seems to be ‘out of the fire and into the frying pan’ at best”.¹⁹

Another destabilizing factor is the question mark concerning the handing over of power in Central Asia, as most countries have leaders beyond retirement age. Here again, Uzbekistan raises particular concerns: it is uncertain who could follow 74-year old President Karimov in a peaceful succession. Not only has he marginalized civil society, but most opposition leaders are in jail or have been driven into exile; it is thus even possible that the only foreseeable alternative to the Karimov regime would come from Islamic circles. Karimov has been fighting hard against fundamentalism and so-called terrorists, but experts doubt that his strategy will prove successful. Human Rights Watch estimates that more than 600 Uzbek citizens have been put into prison simply for practising Islam. This can only lead to further erosion of Uzbekistan’s credibility as a secular state. At the same time

the drug trade is growing, providing a major source of profit for local terrorist organizations.

The dogs bark but the caravan passes: unclear conditions for the withdrawal

Declaring the exit date from Afghanistan for combat troops was like firing the starting pistol for ISAF troop-contributing nations to look for reliable solutions with a view to an orderly withdrawal. Once the magic date of 2014 was set, many questions had to be answered. What materials will still be needed there? What can stay (probably declared as international technical assistance)? What has to be taken home? And which route is sufficiently reliable? In addition, prudent planning for such massive redeployment of personnel and equipment requires an answer to some basic questions: what are the commitments after 2014, which capabilities can be withdrawn, and which will still be needed?

During the last ten years more military equipment and know-how was brought into Afghanistan than ever before in the country’s history. Even if specialists expect a lot of material to be left in the country, most of the military equipment needs to be taken away, if only so as to prevent it falling into the wrong hands in the future.

NATO estimates that 125,000 containers and up to 80,000 vehicles will need to be withdrawn from Afghanistan. The majority of it will be US cargo. However, British Secretary of State for Defence Philip Hammond also expects a “major logistical operation to get around 11,000 containers and around 3,000 armed vehicles back from Afghanistan and we will need to work with partners to do so”.²⁰ In addition, Germany will have to bring back 6,000 containers and more than 500 vehicles. Air transport cannot be the only solution, as illustrated by a simple example of the expense involved: a one-way flight of an An-124 cargo plane, able to bring 12 containers from Germany to Afghanistan, can cost up to 350,000 euros. Reliable land routes are therefore indispensable.

The impending withdrawal could lead to a race for pole position between the allies as they prepare their withdrawal through the northern transit nations. This could result in a cost explosion if the Alliance does not manage to find common solutions.²¹

The costs for transit services have already increased. Northern routes through Central Asia are in any case more cost-intensive than the southern transit corridors. “The actual cost-per-container figure for cargo through the Northern Distribution Network is approximately \$17,500, compared to approximately \$7,200 for cargo through Pakistan ground routes,” says a US

¹⁷ <http://en.rian.ru/business/20120104/170617254.html>

¹⁸ See V. Panfilova, Gas ultimatum to Tashkent. Uzbekistan has provoked the collapse of the industry in Tajikistan, 10 April 2012, <http://therearenosunglasses.wordpress.com/2012/04/10/uzbekistan-gas-and-railroad-blockade-shutting-down-tajikistans-primary-industries/> and Joshua Kucera, Did Uzbekistan Bomb Its Own Railway?, 1 December 2012, www.eurasianet.org

¹⁹ Louis Arbour, Next year’s wars, Foreign Policy, 27 December 2012, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/commentary/next-years-wars-2012.aspx>

²⁰ Nathan Hodge, US secures new Afghan exit routes, The Wall Street Journal, 29 February 2012.

²¹ German MP and member of the Defense Committee, Elke Hoff, quoted in “Deutschen Abzug aus Afghanistan zuegig vorbereiten”, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 2 May 2012.



Defense Department spokesman.²² The cost for reverse transit from Afghanistan through Central Asia may rise even further. Uzbekistan will charge carriers of non-military goods leaving Afghanistan up to 50 per cent more than the existing rate for the use of its railways. The more cost-intensive reverse transit has not yet started, but the US already spends 500 million US dollars per year on transit fees through Central Asia to Afghanistan.²³

Some allies are therefore discussing the possibility of paying transit fees to Central Asian states in kind, i.e. with material and equipment. The logic for the withdrawing party is clear and beneficial. For transit countries, this kind of arrangement brings disadvantages: a variety of used and largely non-interoperable weapon systems will not help them. As a Tajik expert put it: “We would shoot a little, ammunition will run out, and the weapons will turn into a scrap, because, first, there is no money to buy them, and second there is no corresponding [support] agreement.”²⁴

Against the background of the cost-intensive withdrawal, leaving non-lethal equipment seems to be an attractive solution. When the US withdrew from Iraq in 2011, they left non-military equipment worth 700 million US dollars in Iraq.²⁵ This trend will also be observed in Afghanistan and Central Asia: donation of infrastructure material that can be used by local authorities or companies after NATO’s military engagement as a kind of development aid.

The transit countries are also interested in commercially useful initiatives. Sometimes this trend is used to defuse politically controversial issues. As the discussion about military bases has become increasingly controversial, there has been a tendency to “convert” them into civilian transit centres and thereby deflect criticism. Russia went ahead with its offer to NATO to use Vostochnyj Airport in the central Russian city of Ulyanovsk. As a result of problems in selling this plan to the Russian population, which is more used to politicians condemning NATO as a source of problems, Russian officials have hastened to declare that the installation used by NATO will simply be a transit facility (“perevalochnyj punkt”) and not a military base (“voennaya baza”).²⁶ The renaming of the US Air Base at Kyrgyz Manas International Airport, which serves as a crucial transit facility for the US and almost a dozen other ISAF troop contributors, also reflects the political nuances of the host nation’s position vis-à-vis ISAF/OEF: when activated in December 2001, the base was named Ganci Air Base in honour of a New York fireman, who was killed in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Then the name was changed to Manas Air Base and finally to Manas Transit Center

(“Transit Center at Manas”). Kyrgyz President Atambayev, who frequently announces the impending closure of this base, declared recently that Kyrgyzstan is ready to continue its support to its US partners after the lease agreement expires in 2014, but only as a civilian centre, “similar to a logistics centre the Russians are setting up in Ulyanovsk now”.²⁷ In Kyrgyzstan this military Transit Center is a constant bone of contention also because of the concern about the country becoming a possible target for Iranian counterstrikes if the US were launching, or supporting, military action against Tehran.

In general, trust in NATO – and especially US – troops (very often there is little differentiation between the two) seems to have suffered in Central Asia for a number of reasons. First, concern has grown as to why more than 100,000 troops have failed to deal with a few thousand Taliban fighters. Second, there is little faith that Western troops would come to Central Asia’s rescue if the national security of one or more Central Asian states were seriously challenged. Third, NATO (and, again, the US in particular) is suspected of planning to set up long-term military bases in Central Asia independent of the operation in Afghanistan, as a means of securing strategic influence. Finally, some leaders are worried about the “Arab Spring syndrome” which is seen by some as the result of deliberate action by the US.²⁸

There is even less appetite to join forces with the “alternative,” the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO, comprising Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), which openly tries to limit the impact of Western forces and could thus theoretically put an end to lucrative transit arrangements. Ismoil Rahmatov, a Tajik expert on political affairs, sees the situation in the following terms: “The Central Asian countries should adhere to the decisions taken within the framework of the CSTO, under which the organization’s member states cannot host military bases of third countries without the consent of all members of the CSTO.”²⁹ This agreement – maybe a product of simple mistrust – should in principle make it easier to control political moves by CSTO members. In actual practice it can be circumvented, as the renaming of air bases or transit centres has shown. In addition, as all CSTO members except Armenia are similarly involved in the transit business to and from Afghanistan, the agreement will surely not put a stop to cooperation with ISAF troop contributors. However, it could cause a credibility problem for Russia within the CSTO, as the traditional naysayers in the Kremlin have now themselves jumped on the bandwagon with the plans for a NATO transit hub in Ulyanovsk.

²² Deirdre Tynan, Central Asia: Who’s the Big Winner in the NDN Sweepstakes?, 7 February 2012, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64969>

²³ Charles Recknagel, Neighboring Countries Scramble to be NATO’s Exit Rout From Afghanistan, 21 March 2012, <http://www.rferl.org>

²⁴ Abdullo Habib in an interview with Avesta news agency, 7 March 2012, quoted by BBC Monitoring, 8 March 2012

²⁵ Der Spiegel, 14 May 2012, p. 20.

²⁶ See Heidi Reisinger, A NATO transit hub in Ulyanovsk - What’s behind the Russian debate? NATO Defense College Report, April, 2012, <http://www.ndc.nato.int/about/search.php?icode=2>

²⁷ Kyrgyz President Atambayev in a live interview with Kyrgyz national TV on 2 May 2012, quoted by BBC Monitoring, 2 May 2012.

²⁸ The Kyrgyz commentator Orozbek Moldaliyev, online news agency KyrTAg, quoted by BBC Monitor, 18 May 2012.

²⁹ Russian internet news agency Regnum, quoted by BBC Monitoring, 8 March 2012.



Russia's special role in Central Asia

As an important transit partner and a regional power, Moscow has for years sought to sit at the NATO table of troop-contributing nations. According to Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, "it's not fair, it's not honest"³⁰ to deny Russia a standing invitation to NATO meetings of ISAF troop-contributing nations. Sergei Lavrov takes every opportunity to promote Russia's engagement in the question of Afghanistan. Indeed, there is no contemporary security issue where the interests of NATO and Russia coincide so closely. Cooperation over Afghanistan would be a far more promising project than missile defence, which is fraught with difficulties and frustrations for both sides.

NATO nations have taken differing approaches to the question of how best to deal with Russia. Some are for intensified cooperation within the framework of the NATO Russia Council (NRC), although this is not what Russia wants. Others are simply against a Russian footprint in Afghanistan, given the Afghan experience (as well as their own) with the Soviet Union. Several member countries reject Russia's promotion to the table of troop contributors, even on a case-by-case basis. They are convinced that, without Moscow's clear alignment with NATO strategy in Afghanistan and/or a significant Russian contribution to the mission, Moscow should be kept at a distance from any operational meetings and the associated decision-making process. Last but not least, there is also legitimate concern that other transit nations could ask for similar privileges.

Irrespective of Summit deliverables and the issues associated with US President Obama's reset policy towards Russia, there are pragmatic arguments for enhanced engagement with Russia in Afghanistan and ISAF. During the withdrawal phase from Afghanistan, Russia will play a significant role as a major transit nation. After the withdrawal of NATO combat troops, Russia will have to play a far more important role as a regional power.³¹

Despite the vast distance separating Moscow from Afghanistan, Russia is extremely vulnerable to instability emerging from its southern flank. For Moscow the threat of Islamization and of an explosion in drug trafficking is very real. Russia regards Central Asian countries as easy targets for terrorism and Islamist extremism. This explains the Kremlin's strong stance in favour of - the otherwise unpopular - NATO staying in Afghanistan and the barbed diplomatic statements of the Russian government in the State Duma, to the effect that NATO is a dangerous relic of the Cold War but nevertheless not wholly bad (and sometimes even quite good) in terms of its ability to manage problems in Russia's southern neighbourhood. The following statement

by Vladimir Putin to the Russian State Duma is emblematic in this respect: "We do not want our soldiers to fight on the Tajik-Afghan border, right? It's in our national interests to help maintain stability in Afghanistan. Well, NATO and the Western community are present there. God bless them!"³² Russian officials expect a dramatic worsening of the situation in Afghanistan once NATO's commitment there ends. Yevgeny Minchenko, Director of the independent International Institute of Political Expertise in Moscow, echoes this pessimism in his assessment that "the idea of [US forces] leaving too soon is a nightmare for Moscow".³³

Since 1992 Moscow has tried hard to set up a common system to provide security in the post-Soviet space. The CSTO, which started life in 1992 as the Tashkent Treaty Organization, has already been mentioned above: so far it has not delivered when military help was needed.³⁴ Dmitry Rogozin, former Russian Ambassador to NATO and now Vice-Premier with responsibility for the defence industry, thus seemed almost to be whistling in a graveyard when he stated that NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan would be the moment of truth for the CSTO: "We will be ready for any scenario. Russia is aware of its responsibility for its own security and the security of the Central Asian countries where Islamic radicals, who will attempt to cross the border, will have to be stopped to prevent them from penetrating Russia and perpetrating new crimes."³⁵ Alexey Malashenko, a scholar-in-residence at the Carnegie Center in Moscow, is pessimistic in his assessment of Russia's ability to take up this challenge. He describes Russia's political, economic and cultural influence in Central Asia as being in a "situation of decline", and concludes that "[Putin and his team] are not ready for the future in Central Asia."³⁶

³⁰ dpa, 19 April 2012.

³¹ In favour of an enhanced role for Russia in Afghanistan, see: Marlène Laruelle, Russia's strategies in Afghanistan and their consequences for NATO, NDC Research Paper n 69, November 2011.

³² Quoted by James Brooke, God bless NATO?, The Moscow News, 16 April 2012.

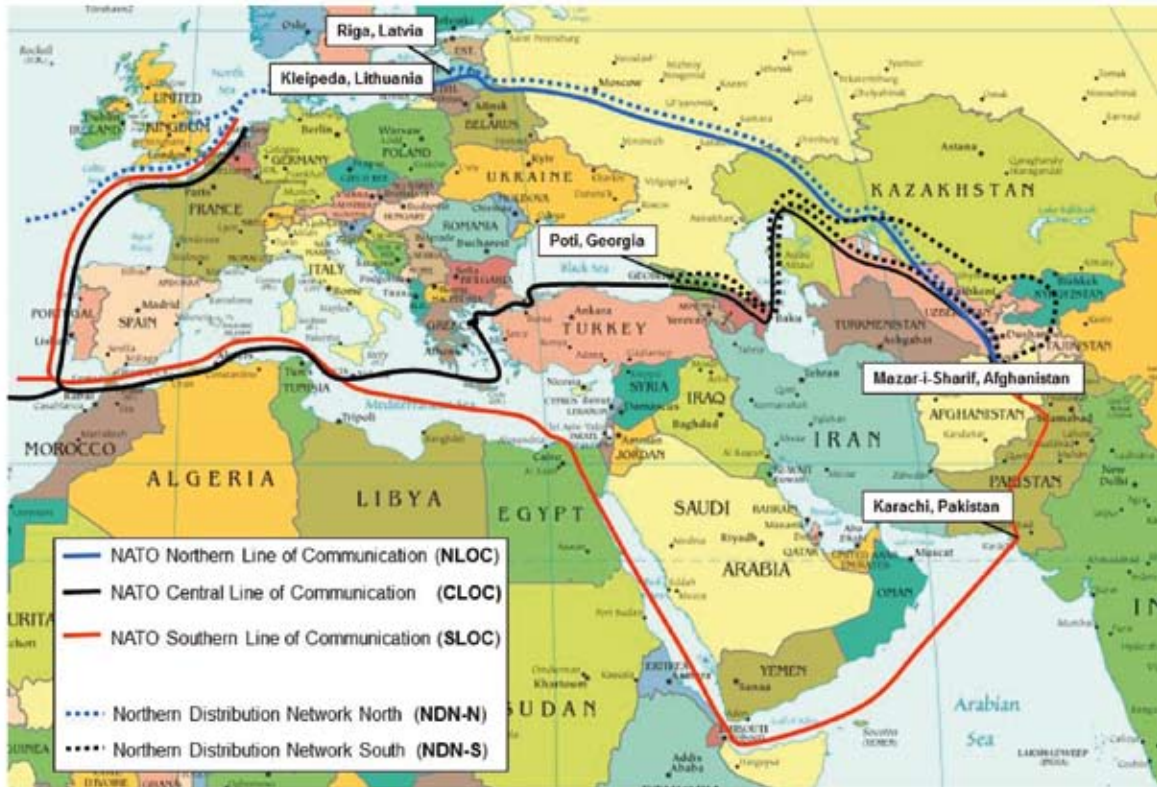
³³ See Fred Weir, Russia urges NATO to stay in Afghanistan beyond 2014, The Christian Science Monitor, 19 April 2012.

³⁴ Neutral Turkmenistan is not a member, and Uzbekistan, a member on the rebound, rejects participation in military projects such as the "Collective Rapid Reaction Force".

³⁵ <http://english.ruvr.ru/2011/07/08/52979840.html>

³⁶ Richard Weitz, Central Asia: Russian Influence Overestimated, 12 March 2012, Eurasianet.org

NATO and US supply lines



SOURCES: U.S. TRANSPORTATION COMMAND, NATURAL EARTH MAPPING

JOHN BRETSCHNEIDER/STAFF



Routes into and out of Afghanistan

As supply lines through Central Asia become more and more important for NATO troops in Afghanistan and will continue to do so with a view to redeployment, NATO increasingly has to rely on authoritarian-led states for transit. When one considers the Central Asian states' poor track record in regional cooperation Central Asian and the distinctly cool relations between most of their leaders, it is not surprising that they have no common approach in terms of support for NATO troops. The host and transit nations prefer bilateral agreements that give them greater room for manoeuvre and more flexible financial arrangements. In addition, NATO's approach to logistics opens the door for bargaining worthy of a bazaar.

While the NATO nations' highly individualized system of supply routes is expensive, the benefits for the people in transit nations are questionable. For example, villagers living close to Manas Transit Center often protest that they do not see any benefits although it is on their heads that "waste is being dumped".³⁷ In addition, this system does not encourage regional cooperation through transit arrangements. Most importantly, the Alliance and its member nations run the risk of becoming pawns in a game which is played in accordance with individual financial interests and misguided regional politics.

For NATO planners this bilateral patchwork of so-called "multimodal transit" by air, sea, rail and road is a costly nightmare. According to the NATO principle that "costs lie where they fall", every nation is responsible for moving capabilities to and from Afghanistan on its own. NATO is responsible for general coordination at a strategic level and has therefore established the "ISAF Redeployment" Task Force, which is co-chaired by International Staff and the International Military Staff. What is already apparent is that collecting multiple items of information about NATO countries' national arrangements has been made particularly difficult by the lack of transparency; taking coordination a stage further could therefore be even more demanding. Harmonizing national logistics systems is a serious challenge, because of the diversity of needs, technical/military equipment and security standards. The military engagement in landlocked Afghanistan highlights the need to find a meaningful answer to the question of "how to get logistics to be more NATO".

As an alternative to highly cost-intensive air transport, nations have to find reliable land transit routes. Every NATO nation or non-NATO troop-contributing nation has to make its own arrangements according to its needs. These arrangements can be based on NATO agreements, or on individual bilateral agreements with the transit states. If individual needs are not covered by the NATO agreement, the country concerned has to

negotiate its own agreements – and vice versa.³⁸ The actual shipping of cargo is always implemented through commercial carriers and logistics companies.³⁹ This means that there are no trucks owned by NATO or by its member states on Central Asian roads.

National contingents embedded in larger contingents of other nations tend to use the logistic procedures of their framework nation. Germany, for example, has opted for individual bilateral agreements in recent years and considers the NATO lines of communication as well as the US-driven Northern Distribution Network as fallback options. NATO lines of communication and bandwagoning in national solutions are especially relevant for smaller troop contributors, because: (1) they often have no special needs which require individual settings; or (2) it would not pay them to set up their own lines. However, it is difficult to identify patterns and therefore it should be mentioned that even the UK, as the second largest ISAF troop contributor, makes almost exclusive use of NATO legal agreements for its shipping arrangements.

The issue is becoming increasingly complicated because almost all lines of communication use the same infrastructure, but are independent of one another and are difficult to combine as they are based on bilateral legal agreements. The management of logistics and supply to and from Afghanistan is a mixture of individual national solutions and involves a multitude of different players – international, national, governmental, private, military and civilian – on both sides of the arrangements. This obviously creates problems. For example, if a truck with German ISAF supplies is stuck in a Central Asian country, the logistics officer in Berlin has to find out whether the reason is a technical problem of the logistics company, sloppiness, bureaucracy, or a possible withdrawal of transit permits (perhaps for political reasons). Ultimately, the main reason for the parallel existence of so many transit routes is the possibility of rerouting cargo quickly.

NATO has basically established three lines of communication: (1) the Northern Line of Communication (NLOC), via Lithuania, Latvia, Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan; (2) the Central Line of Communication (CLOC), via the southern Caucasian states of Georgia and Azerbaijan; and (3) the Southern Line of Communication (SLOC), through Pakistan.

Transit of general cargo and also armoured vehicles to and from Afghanistan along the NLOC and the CLOC is largely unproblematic with Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Amendments to existing agreements with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan are on their way, and were partly signed at the Chicago Summit or shortly afterwards. NATO's strategic military command, the Supreme

³⁷ AKIpress news agency website, Bishkek, quoted by BBC Monitoring, 16 May 2012.

³⁸ Lately the problem has occurred that transit countries tend to place legal agreements in order of preference according to the benefits they receive. Some NATO nations are therefore concerned that NATO agreements could supersede existing bilateral arrangements.

³⁹ Air lift, which can also be provided through national capabilities, is an exception.



Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), is now focusing on the implementation aspects of these arrangements. In a workshop the Allied Movement Coordination Centre will do a proof of principle trial on the Northern Line of Communication with all bodies involved: customers (nations), Latvia as Lead Nation, the Movement Coordination Centre Europe as coordinating body, and freight forwarders.

There are political problems in two cases. With Belarus the negotiations of some amendments to the existing agreement are locked by political constraints in Minsk as a reaction to some restrictions imposed on the Belarusian partnership programme with NATO. But as the route via Belarus has not been used much by Allies, there is no pressure to take action. The second problematic case is that of the NATO transit centre at Ulyanovsk in central Russia. Multi-modal reverse transit arrangements using Ulyanovsk have been agreed at the working level, but the agreement has been delayed due to a heated public debate about a “NATO base” in Russia.

Kazakhstan, which is a partner in the NLOC, could also be a partner along the CLOC if it makes the Caspian port of Aktau available for use. NATO officials are working hard to increase the capacity of both these lines of communication so as to shoulder the major withdrawal movement if the SLOC through Pakistan, which has been more or less closed since November 2011, does not become fully operational again.

Before its actual blockage this critical route had become increasingly unreliable, which made it necessary to look for other routes. In 2009 the US started to set up the so-called Northern Distribution Network (NDN) as an alternative. The NDN, which uses basically the same infrastructure as the NATO arrangements (road and rail networks, sea links), is a purely national logistic network based on bilateral agreements with the transit nations and contractually secured commercial suppliers. It is based on two logistic hubs, the northern one at Riga in Latvia and the southern one at Poti in Georgia.

The NDN-North (NDN-N) starts in Riga, where cargo is transferred from chartered container ships to travel by rail through Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to Afghanistan. The NDN-South (NDN-S) starts in Poti, crosses Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea to Kazakhstan, and then continues by rail via Uzbekistan to Afghanistan. A variant of the NDN-S is the route through Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (KKT) to Afghanistan. This route does not include Uzbekistan and could become increasingly relevant if the Uzbek government raises transit prices, making the KKT route combined with the projected transit hub in Ulyanovsk/Russia an efficient option.⁴⁰ But even if bypassing Uzbekistan is possible, this country will continue to play a central role in the transit game.

Uzbekistan's special role for NATO

After the massacre of Andijan perpetrated by Uzbek security forces in May 2005, neither offers of dialogue nor sanctions created any positive changes in Uzbekistan. The regime in Uzbekistan did not allow international investigation of the Andijan case, and is accused of systematic use of torture on prisoners as well as for suppression of free media and of political opposition.⁴¹ The US had used the air base in Karshi-Khanabad until 2005 but were asked to leave after Washington openly criticized Tashkent for Andijan and, along with the EU, set up sanctions. Since then Uzbek-US relations have been frozen. The EU started to lift its sanctions against Uzbekistan in 2007, and tried to rebuild the partnership through its “Strategy on Central Asia”.

ISAF nations (including Germany, which uses Termez Airport as a central transit hub for Afghanistan) have already demonstrated their pragmatic approach towards Tashkent. The upcoming withdrawal makes further compromise necessary. Uzbekistan has the only functioning railway to the Afghan border, which has been connected to Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan. Before the 75-km railway was finished, transport of cargo was possible only on dusty roads with long waiting-lines at the border. This new railway infrastructure could develop into a regional railway system and play a key role in the economic development of the whole region. Since Uzbekistan has a contract to run the Afghan railway for the first three years, it will play an even more important role in transporting NATO materials (both military and non-military), and especially fuels.

The US NDN lines of communication too rely heavily on Tashkent. In this context the Obama administration asked Congress in 2011 to override the furious objections of human rights groups and resume military aid to Uzbekistan. With the upcoming withdrawal, the time seems to have passed where Uzbek President Islam Karimov was treated as a *persona non grata* in Washington. Sanctions are no longer in the US interest. The more Pakistan becomes a problem as a major transit partner, the more Tashkent is needed. A further important consideration against the previous sanctions is that being able to leave military equipment in the region is less stressful and cheaper than bringing it home – and if this equipment helps to make the transit nation safer, the donation could even be considered as killing two birds with one stone.

Human rights activist and editor of Harper's Magazine, Scott Horton, sees “Uzbekistan [even] as a values challenge for NATO”. He argues that it is a serious contradiction if NATO supports a regime with a negative human rights record in order to maintain a mission to its next-door neighbour in defence of those very same rights. In his view NATO's cooperation with Uzbekistan is very beneficial for the Karimov regime: apart

⁴⁰ Only some NATO nations such as the US and Germany currently have bilateral agreements with Uzbekistan that include the reverse mode option.

⁴¹ HRW-report on torture in Uzbekistan: “No one left to witness”, 13 December 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2011/12/13/no-one-left-witness-0>



from the bonus in political prestige, NATO is taking care of the country's most pressing security problem – radical Islam. Horton goes so far as to say that “the US and NATO are fighting Islam Karimov's war for him, at no expense to him”, and that cooperation to make this military mission possible brings money to the Karimov family or to related clans.⁴²

Uzbekistan has really done the same as Turkmenistan: keep its distance from Moscow, prove a challenging partner for coalition forces, and avoid any kind of transparency, which would be a key factor for common transit solutions.

In sharp contrast to the transparent agreement between the US and Kyrgyz governments on the Manas Transit Center, details of which are available online and even include the financial arrangements,⁴³ the German base at Termez in Uzbekistan is an example of non-transparency. Germany was able to hold the base when cooperation with the Karimov regime became increasingly unpleasant. While the US base in Karshi-Khanabad (known as K2) was closed after the US administration criticized the Uzbek handling of the Andijan massacre, the German base continued to operate despite the political pressure from many sides. Germany, which lacked a feasible alternative for rotation of its troops and needed this transit centre, basically kept quiet about any conditions associated with the bilateral cooperation. Questions as to whether Berlin pays only for services or also for political compliance remain unanswered and leave a bitter taste. When the Green Party officially requested the government to disclose these conditions in the German Bundestag in April 2011, the answer was given by the MoD but subsequently classified because of an intervention of the German MFA. Obviously the deal was based on a verbal agreement, to keep the sums secret.⁴⁴

Challenges and responsibilities

The international community has focused on military operations and Afghan internal politics, but has not found answers to regional questions in a broader context. Neither NATO nor the Central Asian states have developed a strategy on how to compensate for the removal of NATO's stabilizing role. Afghanistan's northern neighbours will not be able to maintain their current low profile in this issue. NATO's withdrawal is thus not only a serious challenge, but also an opportunity for Central Asian countries to deepen their cooperation with the Alliance.

Giving recommendations would go beyond the scope of this research paper, but the challenges and responsibilities for NATO prompt the following thoughts:

- NATO and its member states should act transparently and avoid creating rivalry among the host or transit countries in Central Asia. Nobody should become NATO's “number one partner”. Allies should also avoid competition among themselves, and share information and transit options as openly as possible.
- NATO could take the ISAF withdrawal as a test case to develop a more common approach to logistics. The goal should be less national solo-run and more NATO-coordinated action.
- The Alliance should follow a regional approach that also takes the diversity of the Central Asian countries into account. The withdrawal could help to develop practical transit lines which could be used commercially after 2014 and boost regional trade and cooperation.⁴⁵
- Donating, or paying with, military equipment should be considered carefully. Technical assistance should focus on border security, and should be combined with partnership programmes.
- It would be advisable to accept Russia's role in the region and enhance cooperation with Moscow in regard to Afghanistan, respecting Russian or other regional attempts to launch regional cooperation (CSTO and SCO).
- Even if military planning does not put human rights and good governance issues to the fore, they have to be kept on NATO's political agenda.
- A future challenge is that of regional cooperation, which should be taken one step further by thinking in a wider context. Important players beyond the classic definition of Central Asia have to be included. Not only Pakistan, but also India, China and Iran will play a decisive role in this context of a “wider Central Asia”. NATO's relations with all these countries are practically non-existent. A fair amount of political will would therefore be needed if the Alliance wanted to be a relevant player in the region in the long run.

⁴² Scott Horton, Uzbekistan as a Values Challenge for NATO, Harper's Magazine, 5 March 2012.

⁴³ See <http://www.transitcenteratmanas.com/us/important-documents.html>

⁴⁴ Written question of the Member of the German Bundestag Viola von Cramon on 1 April 2011, Bundestagsdrucksache 17/5638. Another case of non-transparency is that of Turkmenistan, which emphasizes its political and military neutrality towards Afghanistan but is quietly becoming a transit hub for US forces. Turkmenistan not only allows overflight of military personnel and cargo, and has delivered aviation fuel to the US forces since 2002; it also hosts a small US Air Force team which deals with arriving US C-5 and C-17 transport planes and assists in refuelling operations. Although Washington is mostly interested in using the Turkmen road and rail network, there are also rumours that Turkmenistan would offer the use of the Mary air base, which played a major role in the Soviet military campaign in Afghanistan, for “non-military” and strictly commercial use (to avoid clashes with Turkmenistan's neutral status). Washington and Ashgabat are eager not to discuss “basing issues” openly. See Deirdre Tynan, Turkmenistan: Ashgabat Hosts US Military Refueling, Resupply Operations, 7 July 2009, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav070809.shtml>

⁴⁵ See Dena Sholk, NDN can help Central Asia flourish post-2014, Kazakhstan newswire, 4 April 2012, <http://www.universalnewswires.com/centralasia/uzbekistan/viewstory.aspx?id=11733>



The Central Asian countries need to use the period ahead wisely. They could obtain a boost for infrastructure projects and regional cooperation, deepening their partnership with NATO countries in the process. Kyrgyz President Atambaev has emphasized the need for commercial structures, but also for taking greater responsibility: “In the first place, it is necessary to consider Kyrgyzstan’s interests. Secondly, it is necessary to consider the development of events in Afghanistan and their effect on Kyrgyzstan. Third, we have a group of friendly countries and strategic partners. We should take into consideration their views as well. [...] However, I think that [fewer foreign military] bases [would be better] for Kyrgyzstan, because Kyrgyzstan must learn to protect itself on its own and get ready to do so and it must spare no expense for its army, armed forces and servicemen.”⁴⁶

As old as the discussions about the strategic significance of military bases in the region is the hysterical fear that the US/NATO troops may never leave. It is an old myth that Western powers intend to keep a foot in the door in Central Asia. On the contrary, the Central Asian countries should take advantage of international attention so as to move forward to the stage where they can deal autonomously with their security challenges. But this is not enough. A critical step toward genuine long-term stability must be political modernization, and an opening up of regimes. The Central Asian states need to work on attracting outside players in business, science and tourism, so as to avoid dropping off the map and to ensure a continuing international focus on their region.

⁴⁶ Kyrgyz president Atambaev in a live interview on national Kyrgyz TV on 2 May 2012, BBC Monitoring, 2 May 2012.