

A new chapter in relations between NATO & the USA and Central Asia

Józef Lang, Marek Matusiak, Krzysztof Strachota

In recent weeks, defence ministers from NATO countries have been visiting Central Asian countries: representatives of the USA (13 March, Kyrgyzstan), Germany (13 March, Uzbekistan), and Poland (16 March, Uzbekistan), followed by visits of the British secretary of defence (Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan) and the defence minister of Latvia (Uzbekistan). These visits are part of the forthcoming termination of the ISAF and OEF missions in Afghanistan (scheduled for 2014), specifically the removal of forces from Afghanistan along routes running through Central Asia. In the next two years, the region's role will grow significantly for the West; Central Asia is entering a period of crucial importance in connection with the mission in Afghanistan, but is also coming into a series of important geopolitical changes caused by the end of that mission.

Central Asia as support for the OEF and ISAF missions

Since 2001, the Central Asian states have been an important part of the OEF and ISAF missions in Afghanistan. In the initial period of operations, coalition forces operated from their territory under intergovernmental agreements: US forces from bases in Manas, Kyrgyzstan (now a Transit Center) and Karshi-Khanabad, Uzbekistan (until 2005); as of this writing, French air forces are operating from a base in Dushanbe, Tajikistan; and German air forces from Termez in Uzbekistan. The military importance of the bases in Central Asia has fallen significantly with the development of the coalition's infrastructure in Afghanistan itself, but it has never ceased.

In parallel to the region's diminishing role as a place for the coalition forces to base and operate consistently from since 2001, its logistical importance is increasing. The Transit Center at Manas used by the US is of strategic importance to the entire operation, as almost all of the soldiers going to Afghanistan pass through it. Since 2008, when problems in Pakistan (which is the main transit route) escalated, Central Asia's role as a supply route for non-lethal goods (the so-called Northern Distribution Network or *NDN*) has been rising steadily. The next wave of problems with Pakistan in 2011 (the intermittent closure of the route and a drastic reduction of its capacity) meant that up to 75% of goods for the mission

in Afghanistan are being sent via the NDN. There is currently no real alternative route to supply the mission in Afghanistan (although the US is in talks with Pakistan); cooperation with Central Asia (as well as Russia and, to a lesser extent, the countries bordering the South Caucasus along the NDN route) is a prerequisite for the functioning of the mission (for more information, see the Appendix).

Regarding the plan to end operations in Afghanistan by the end of 2014, as announced by NATO and the US (a process which has *de facto* already started), and the need to withdraw troops and equipment (130,000 soldiers from nearly 50 countries), the NDN is the most likely route for their exit from Afghanistan. At the same time, the question of the consequences of withdrawing coalition forces from Afghanistan remains open, including the consequences for the stability of Central Asia and the extension of the cooperation (including their military presence) by the coalition members (principally the US) with the countries in the region.

The visits by coalition politicians to Central Asia are harbingers of intensive contacts between the West (the bulk of forces in Afghanistan are American and European forces) and the countries of the region for at least the next two years. Their primary objective will be to develop effective cooperation mechanisms for the transit (mostly the withdrawal) of their forces and equipment from Afghanistan. Past experience gives hope of a positive result from this cooperation, although it also points to inevitable and quantifiable problems. These include the following:

1. Difficulties in coordinating collaboration. In practice, each coalition country will be forced to negotiate separate agreements with each transit country. Of the latter, the most important will be Russia (due to its location and political importance), Kazakhstan (all the routes run through its territory), and Uzbekistan (which has the main railway route).

2. The political instability of individual countries in the region. Several states in the region have been exposed to severe shocks that may affect the functioning of the route. Examples of this include the upheavals in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and especially in 2010; internal disturbances, such as the protests in Andijan, Uzbekistan in 2005, which indirectly led to a rupture between Tashkent and the US; and Islamist terrorist activity, especially in Tajikistan).

3. Russia's possible resistance. Moscow has repeatedly criticised some aspects of cooperation between the region's countries and the US & NATO, and has lobbied for it to stop (it put pressure on Kyrgyzstan to close the Manas base in 2009, and was indirectly involved in that country's coup in 2010). The Russian factor will increase if any of the individual countries of the region are destabilised. The USA's determination to extend its military presence in the region after 2014, which Moscow categorically opposes, will be of key importance here.

4. The difficulties arising from the specificity of the political systems of the region, as exemplified by the numerous *voltes-face* by Uzbekistan's president on cooperation with the USA (2005); the considerable lack of transparency and corruption in various countries of the region (including the current problems of transport companies in Uzbekistan; the notorious corruption case related to the operation of the Manas base until 2010, which is being investigated in the US Congress), and potential political problems associated with the observance of democratic standards in the countries of the region (as in Uzbekistan).

Consequences for Central Asia

Since 2001, the OEF and ISAF missions, together with the cooperation between the countries in Central Asia and the coalition, has radically changed the region and strengthened the individual states. Firstly, it has held back the main threat to regional security for over a decade – the threat of a mass influx of Islamist radicals from Afghanistan. Secondly, it has significantly strengthened the region's countries vis-à-vis Russia: they have gained in importance and political independence, and broken Russia's monopoly on shaping the regional security situation (though it retains the dominant position). Thirdly, their logistical role for the mission in Afghanistan has resulted in a notable influx of funds: fees for the lease of facilities and the transportation (and purchase) of goods, grants, investments in infrastructure (for example, the NDN's routes are part of a road project within the CAREC program, and are forming its backbone), and other benefits.

The next two years – which will be a period of particular interest to the West – will see the high point of Central Asia's influence. Greater efforts will be made to make maximum use of the political and economic opportunities which have been created. At the same time, by 2014 there will be a thorough revision of the geopolitical balance of power in the region; the withdrawal of the coalition forces from Afghanistan will increase the level of instability in the region and change the relationship between Russia, China and the USA. We may expect that Washington (and unofficially the countries in the region themselves) will remain interested in maintaining or strengthening a US military presence in Central Asia. For their part, Russia and China will strongly oppose this. Another issue is the reformulation of the relationship between Russia, which has traditionally dominant in the region, and a China which is rapidly consolidating its economic and political power, as well as a coordination of their policies towards Afghanistan after 2014. These processes will also significantly affect the functioning of the NDN, and encourage its exploitation for use in political manoeuvring.

Appendix

Central Asia as a logistics base for the ISAF & OEF in Afghanistan

The **Northern Distribution Network (NDN)** is a network of ground supply routes for the US and ISAF missions in Afghanistan, connecting Baltic and Black Sea ports with Afghanistan via road and rail transport through Russia and the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia (see map). The NDN concept also includes purchasing goods and services for the mission in the transit countries. The NDN was initiated by the US and NATO in 2008-9 as a response to threats to the security of supply through Pakistan. Currently, around 75% of all the goods transported by land which are needed to conduct the mission, including 85% of the fuel, is transported via the NDN. One of its limitations is the transit countries' refusal to permit the transport of weapons and ammunition through their territories. The legal dimension of the NDN's activity is based on bilateral agreements between NATO countries and transit countries, concluded by commercial companies.

As part of the NDN, the Navoi airport in Uzbekistan has been used since 2009 for the transportation (by Korean Air) of non-lethal cargo for US forces.

Other elements of the Central Asian logistics mission in Afghanistan:

1. The Manas Transit Center; the US air base in Kyrgyzstan, operational since 2001, which is used primarily to transport troops and weapons to and from Afghanistan. In 2009 (as a result of pressure on Kyrgyzstan from Russia, whose aim was the total closure of the base), it was renamed the Transit Center.
2. The base in Termez, Uzbekistan; this German air base has been operational since 2002, and to a small degree is also used for logistical purposes. Since the closure of the US's base in Karshi-Khanabad base, Termez's importance has increased; as of 2008, it has also been unofficially used by other NATO countries.
3. The airport in Dushanbe; since 2002 a small French air base has been located there, and it is also used to a limited extent for logistical purposes.

The Northern Distribution Network scheme.

