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Latest issue: Volume 2 - Issue #02 - 20 January 2003

Terrorism and security of energy supply forming NATO

At its recent summit, NATO made a historic decision to perform missions as necessary beyond Europe: peace-enforcement operations at first, and power-projection operations through a planned rapid-deployment allied force at a later stage. NATO as an alliance (not just some of its member countries in their national capacities) will undertake such actions collectively, drawing on the resources and capabilities of all members, and enhancing their political solidarity in the process. This year already, NATO will take over the peace-support operation in Afghanistan. The summit in Prague invited seven countries, from the Baltic to the Black Sea, to join NATO as members, guaranteeing their security in the future. Additionally it is refocusing to response to the requirements of antiterrorist operations in the post-Sept. 11 world, as well as to the imperative of guaranteeing stable oil supplies to the West.

NATO has now secured the Black Sea's western rim in Romania and Bulgaria, and thus cemented the link with the southern, Turkish rim. From the east Balkan coast, the alliance is well positioned now to reach out directly to Georgia and the energy-rich Caspian basin, which have become the new neighborhood of the West. NATO therefore urgently needs to devise a strategy that will permanently guarantee Western overall interests in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Such interests include: direct access to energy resources through west-bound pipelines; West-East trade corridors; and forward bases for allied operations against terrorist groups and mass destruction-weapons proliferator states. These Western goals dovetail with the interests of the region's countries -- former Soviet dependencies -- in terms of security and modern development. Thus the basis exists for creating security partnerships between NATO and the region's countries.

The U.S.-led Western military presence post-9/11 enjoys a level of political acceptance and support that is rarely appreciated outside the region. The presidents of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan welcomed the American-led Western deployments and resisted Russian pressure when President Vladimir Putin initially tried to prevent those deployments. When the Central Asian presidents had to take sides, they sided with the U.S. as soon as they were reliably assured of U.S. support for the long haul.

Anti-Western attitudes of the kind widespread in many other Muslim countries are simply unknown or very rare in Central Asian countries and Azerbaijan. In Georgia and Azerbaijan -- where multi-party systems operate, however deficiently -- the pro-Western orientation rests on a solid, cross-party political consensus. Thus, NATO should be able to rely on significant political support in this region.

The South Caucasus and Central Asia form a geostrategic and economic continuum, stretching from the Black Sea's eastern coast to Afghanistan. This is manifest in at least four ways: First, the requirements of oil and gas transit from Caspian countries through multiple pipelines to consumer markets. Second, the need to create a secure environment for connecting Europe with Asia along direct trading routes ("Silk Road" projects). Third, the challenges of violent Islam and international terrorism, which can actively or potentially target almost any country in this entire region. And fourth, military requirements for permanently safe corridors, logistical infrastructure and a network of host-country-support installations which could facilitate direct access from NATO Europe to theatres of antiterrorist operations around Central Asia.

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Thus, Caspian oil and gas development -- a major U.S. and European policy goal with global and regional ramifications -- was pursued amid a security vacuum. In July 2001 the U.S. and Britain could do (or even say) nothing when Iran's military evicted British Petroleum from a major project in Azerbaijani offshore waters. In 2001 and 2002, Russia resorted to naval intimidation of the other Caspian countries -- this being one means to dissuade Kazakhstan from joining the U.S.-supported project of a trans-Caspian undersea pipeline that would plug into the planned Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline. In the indispensable transit country of Georgia, the U.S. alone stood in the way of a threatened Russian military intervention last year that could have nipped Baku-Ceyhan in the bud. In NATO, only Turkey is actively engaged alongside the U.S. in this issue. Although NATO's European members -- most of them concurrently members of the European Union -- are the primary potential consumers of Caspian oil and gas, they are doing very little thus far for the security of the Caspian basin and Georgia.

The West's new security requirements in the post-9/11 world have opened even wider the window of opportunity that NATO had failed to use (and the U.S. under-utilised) in the 1991-2001 decade. On the other hand, Russia in 2002 embarked on a policy aimed at narrowing the West's window of opportunity in Central Asia. At the year's end, Russia deployed forces in Kyrgyzstan, in a countermove to the American-led Western force deployment there. The Kremlin is building a military-political bloc through the CIS Collective Security Organization, focusing on Central Asia. Meanwhile, Russia is successfully monopolizing the transit of Western-extracted Caspian oil and gas.

How much longer the window of opportunity will stay open, and how wide, is therefore far from certain. All this underscores the urgency for NATO to prepare for a strategic role in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. The problem is two-fold: first, to demonstrate conclusively NATO's relevance through new missions in this region; and, second, to bring this particular region within the West's economic and security orbit. These, clearly, are twin challenges. The alliance should begin by clarifying to its own publics the strategic interests at stake, and assuring the countries in that region that NATO will be there for the long haul.

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