



**Svante E. Cornell** is Deputy Director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and an Assistant Research Professor at Johns Hopkins University-SAIS. He is also Research Director of the Silk Road Studies Program and Associate Professor of East European Studies at Uppsala University, Sweden. He is the Editor of CACI's biweekly publication, the Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst (<http://www.cacianalyst.org/>).

Svante Cornell was *NIASnytt* Guest Editor for "Central Asia One Year After" (3/2002).

# NATO after Enlargement: PFP Shifts Emphasis to Central Asia and the Caucasus

By Svante Cornell

*The enlargement of NATO in the spring 2004 and the new geopolitical reality are prompting the organisation to refocus its energies. The geographic focus of NATO's Partnership for Peace programme (PFP) is clearly shifting eastward as most countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where much of the programme activities were previously concentrated, have become NATO members. Following its notable success in fostering military reform and cooperation, PFP is now seen as an instrument with great potential for similar success also in areas where it has been involved either with lesser intensity or not at all. This means increasing assets are now available for programmes in the western Balkans, the South Caucasus and Central Asia.*

## NATO into Soviet territory

The second expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe brought the organisation into the territory of the former Soviet Union, through the accession of the three Baltic states. Moreover, by extending into Bulgaria and Romania, NATO moved into the Black Sea area even more forcefully than Turkey's long-standing membership had already implied. This brought the organisation still closer to the South Caucasus.

Enlargement also meant the inclusion of states with significantly greater interest in the security of the South Caucasus and Central Asia. As a result, NATO's emphasis has clearly begun shifting to these regions.

## NATO's mission in Central Asia

The shift in emphasis is also related to the Alliance responding to ever-greater security interests in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the wider Middle East. NATO member states are now deeply committed militarily in both Afghanistan and Iraq, generating

greater interest in the wider Middle Eastern area. They have also operated military bases in Central Asia crucial to the campaign in Afghanistan. As an organisation, NATO is in charge of the peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan. If Balkan operations in the mid-to-late 1990s were NATO's first out-of-area operations, Afghanistan stands out by its distance from NATO member countries. As Stephen Blank has noted, 'NATO is undergoing a profound transformation into an organization whose main missions are collective security and crisis management and whose main centre of activity is increasingly located in the Muslim world.' As such, plans exist to extend the Partnership for Peace to several countries in North Africa, possibly even Qatar.

Among NATO members, the United States defence analysis community was the first to identify several facts: firstly, that the South Caucasus and Central Asia form an intimate part of the arc of instability stretching from North Africa to Southeast Asia, which the USA has identified as

a most likely source of threats in the foreseeable future. These states, although fragile, are still stable and led by friendly governments. The six Muslim states of the region form the part of the Islamic world where anti-Americanism arguably has the weakest following. Secondly, on a more practical level, the South Caucasus and Central Asia have actually functioned as springboards for US and coalition military operations, and may continue to do so in future contingencies. Both the South Caucasus and Central Asia were crucial to the allied military campaign in Afghanistan. Central Asian states, especially Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and to a lesser extent Tajikistan, provided bases which proved crucial for the military campaign and the successful overthrow of the Taliban regime.

The South Caucasus, especially Azerbaijan and Georgia, provided a logistical corridor vital for coalition aircraft access to operational theatres further east. The importance of the South Caucasus has been further

boosted by the operation in Iraq, and by tensions with Iran.

In sum, immediate challenges such as the peacekeeping operation in Afghanistan, as well as more long-term strategic considerations of NATO member states, are making Central Asia and the South Caucasus increasingly important areas of concern for NATO.

### **The implications of NATO's new role**

What, then, does an increasing NATO role in this part of the world mean? First, it is important to note that this is unlikely to entail NATO membership. Some states may eventually qualify for membership, but all have a long road of political and military reform ahead of them before that goal can be accomplished. Only Azerbaijan and Georgia have voiced aspirations of joining the alliance, and both have submitted Individual Partnership Action Plans, as has Uzbekistan. For the South Caucasus, deeper reform and positive moves toward democratic development and civilian control over armed forces could bring the regional states that so desire to the stage of Membership Action Plans in the next few years, a status that Albania and Macedonia already have. Many primarily European NATO members are not interested in expansion into the South Caucasus, however. If the South Caucasus to many seems too distant, the prospect of Central Asian states gaining membership in NATO is surely more remote.

The crucial point of NATO is not an issue of membership or no membership. To the countries of the region, NATO programmes of a wide variety serve to transform, over time, the overall regional security

picture – with or without membership. PfP is building political and military bridges between member countries, between NATO members and non-members, but also among non-members. This in itself increases security in these regions. Moreover, it accelerates military reform, while simultaneously having a positive effect in general on political development and accountability. Most importantly, through training programmes and participation in peacekeeping missions and exercises, PfP is helping to foster a new generation of military officers whose thinking differs markedly from the Soviet military mentality of their predecessors.

NATO is evolving as its composition, its activities, and the interests of its member states are all in flux. From having been a defence pact, NATO has gradually turned into a security provider in Europe and its neighbourhood. Where political and economic bodies do not venture, NATO has shown a willingness and a capacity to engage countries and regions important to European security and make a difference in the regional security picture of these states. NATO's move into Central Asia and the South Caucasus is likely to further the security and stability of these regions – perhaps most obviously so in the South Caucasus, where a considerable security deficit has persisted.

### **Challenges to NATO**

Two main challenges to NATO's success in Central Asia and the South Caucasus are its relations with Russia, and the internal debates among member states. Russia's knee-jerk reactions to increasing NATO activities in its self-proclaimed 'Near Abroad' are zero-sum: to most Russian actors, NATO activities of any

type are simply against Russia's interests. This is clearly the case with Russian perceptions of NATO activities in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. NATO's mission in this context is to drive home the point that its activities are not directed against anyone; furthermore, that by increasing regional security in these regions, NATO's programmes actually increase rather than decrease Russia's security. With the dominance of power ministries over Russian foreign and security policy-making, this point is unlikely to be accepted easily in Moscow. Nevertheless, Moscow's opposition should not be taken as an obstacle to NATO's efforts to increase regional security.

Secondly, NATO member countries have differing views of the alliance's role, and specifically on its out-of-area ventures. The USA is clearly far more positive toward NATO expansion into the South Caucasus than are most European powers. Whether European states will gradually see the need for a greater engagement of the South Caucasus is uncertain; nevertheless, the US lead is likely to be followed by a number of NATO members, most obviously its new member states. Internal debates over NATO's role may for some time mitigate the alliance's effectiveness in these regions. More than anything else, it is the state of transatlantic relations that will determine the effectiveness of NATO, also in Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

### **References**

Blank, Stephen (2004). 'NATO's Drive to the East', *In The National Interest*, 11 February.