

Kazakhstan's Partnership with NATO: Strengths, Limits and Prognosis

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This paper explores recent developments in relations between Kazakhstan and NATO. Changes in the nature and level of the partnership are examined, and it will be shown that Kazakhstani diplomats have utilized opportunities from problems between Uzbekistan and the West in order to obtain preferential arrangements with the Alliance. Kazakhstan has emerged as the key partner for NATO within Central Asia, based partly on its stable political and economic climate, the continued weaknesses of the other indigenous militaries, and the developing Western energy interests in the Caspian.

Kazakhstan joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program in 1995. This provided Kazakhstan with invaluable experience and contacts with the military establishments of NATO members. Kazakhstan's cooperation with the Alliance could be portrayed for internal domestic political purposes as promoting security in the region, and arguably by narrowing the focus of relations with NATO these elements have been more successful. NATO on the other hand, utilized the PfP program with Kazakhstan as a unique venue for fostering greater integration of Central Asian states with western political and military institutions.¹

At the defense ministers' sessions of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), in December 2001, Kazakhstan's former Defense Minister, Mukhtar Altynbayev, stated, "Kazakhstan considers participation in EAPC and PfP program as one of priorities of cooperation aimed to integration into global security structures. Kazakhstan took political decision about joining the Planning and Review Process Program (PARP) which will allow us to increase the level of relations with NATO." In June 2002, Kazakhstan took the step of becoming the first Central Asian country to join PARP.

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¹ Richard Giragosian and Roger N. McDermott, "US Military Engagement in Central Asia: "Great Game" or "Great Gain?," *Central Asia and the Caucasus* (January 2004), p.3.

Indeed, the principal stimuli to enhanced cooperation with the West in general terms, and the Alliance in specific areas, stemmed from the radically altered security environment in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, in New York and Washington, D.C. (hereafter 9/11). The subsequent deployment of U.S. and coalition military forces into Central Asia, notably in Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, fostered a suitable political atmosphere in which Kazakhstan was able to promote the deepening of its relations with NATO without incurring the displeasure of Russia and China. Another key factor was Kazakhstan's interest in supporting peace operations within Iraq in 2003. In this sense, Kazakhstan was emerging as a strong supporter of the international coalition against terrorism. In July 2003, NATO Secretary-General, Lord Robertson, visited Kazakhstan. Robertson particularly thanked President Nursultan Nazarbayev and Kazakhstan's parliament for deciding to offer troops in support of post-war reconstruction in Iraq. This development signaled Astana's commitment to its future cooperation with NATO, contributing to the stabilization forces within Iraq, despite the international controversy that surrounded the U.S. decision to prosecute the war. However, this is only a small part of the growing evidence that Astana has pursued a more pro-Western approach in its foreign policy and military affairs.²

On December 2, 2003 at the defense ministers sessions of the EAPC, Altynbayev proposed the creation of PfP structures within Kazakhstan. "These structures, taking into account the unique geopolitical location of Kazakhstan, internal stability in the country, consent among ethnic groups and religions, will inevitably move forward our possibilities in the struggle against terrorism."³ Kazakhstan was evidently interested in what it could get from furthering its exiting levels of cooperation with NATO, though undecided in many ways as to the precise nature or goals involved.

On October 4, 2006 Kasymzhomart Tokayev, Kazakhstan's then Foreign Minister met in Brussels with NATO Secretary-General, Jaap de Hoop Schaeffer, in order to examine ways of advancing Kazakhstan's PfP cooperation. Tokayev participated in the NATO Council in the 26+1 format. Schaeffer understandably praised Kazakhstan's contribution to regional and global peace, while the talks themselves assessed the future potential for joint efforts in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, as well as countering terrorism, extremism, and the drug trade. Interestingly, this mirrored the stated agenda of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), though Schaeffer in no way presented deeper cooperation with

² Roger N. McDermott, "The Kazakh Military Looks West", *Central Asia - Caucasus Analyst*, July 16 2003.

³ Mukhtar Altynbayev, "Partnership role in the Defense reform: from Prague to Istanbul", speech at the Defense Ministers sessions of the EAPC, Brussels, December 2 2003.

the Alliance as an alternative to Kazakhstan pursuing security cooperation within the SCO or the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Tokayev was specific: Kazakhstan and NATO must cooperate on the practical aspects of implementing the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) agreed to in January 2006. IPAP serves as another mechanism for the Allies to support and advise interested partners. Partner states initiate the IPAP enabling them to prioritize, harmonize, and organize all aspects of NATO-partner relationships via the Euro Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) and PfP. It provides an opportunity for the partner state, in this case Kazakhstan, to address its own particular circumstances and interests. The plans are developed on a bi-annual basis and "NATO will provide its focused, country-specific assistance and advice on reform objectives that interested partners might wish to pursue in consultation with the Alliance." IPAP is a NATO initiative to address concerns amongst partners that the PfP program is often too narrowly focused to meet their needs.⁴ Tokayev mentioned NATO's assistance with the full-scale reform of the armed forces, strengthening Kazakhstan's peace-support potential, and broadening interaction between NATO and the Central Asian countries within the PfP program.⁵

In fact, Kazakhstan's interest in cooperation with Western countries has grown dramatically since 9/11, as confirmed by the number of military diplomatic missions to Kazakhstan, which has tripled during this period. "There are 25 foreign military diplomatic missions in Kazakhstan, which is three times more than the figure in 2001," Alтынбайев boasted in January 2006. According to Alтынбайев, this provided "convincing evidence that our armed forces' image and reputation and an interest in Kazakhstan's experience in reforming the army are growing beyond the borders of our country."⁶ Yet even in making such assertions, Alтынбайев always balanced his pro-Western statements with reminders that Kazakhstan is committed to its obligations within the CSTO and the SCO. The porous nature of the vast Kazakhstan-Russia border leaves Russia open to smuggling syndicates operating from China transiting through the border. Such obvious Russian security interests complicate NATO's relations with Kazakhstan; it must be conducted under Moscow's watchful eye.⁷

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ "NATO to Help Strengthen Kazakhstan's Military," *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, October 5 2006.

⁶ "Foreign Military Missions Triple in Kazakhstan Since 2001," *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, January 27 2006.

⁷ "Drug Syndicates Penetrate Russia-Kazakhstan Border," *RIA-Novosti*, December 8 2005.

Russia

On October 3, 2006, Russian President, Vladimir Putin, completing a state visit to Kazakhstan, defined the priority areas for developing bilateral relations, namely in the fuel and energy sector, agricultural industry, and space exploration. Putin wants to see these joint ventures not only bring financial benefits to each side but also increase the competitiveness of Russian and Kazakh companies in foreign markets. This is central to Putin's plans to promote integration, including reforming the Commonwealth of Independent States and the development of cooperation within the Eurasian Economic Community and the Single Economic Space. "Russia and Kazakhstan are 'locomotives' for many integration processes in the post-Soviet space," Putin said.⁸ While the Kremlin may be applying political and economic pressure on Georgia in order to dissuade Tbilisi from risking NATO membership, Moscow sees the bilateral relationship with Kazakhstan as so strong that the risks of Astana going "too far" are minimal. Practical security-enhancing packages are now more forthcoming from Russia, and Nazarbayev will take into account how much he could lose by provoking Moscow.

Army General, Vladimir Pronichev, the First Deputy Director of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and head of the FSB's Border Guard Service, announced on October 4, 2006 that 4.4 billion rubles (approximately US\$160 million) would be allocated toward developing the infrastructure of the Russian-Kazakh border in 2007. "Plans to develop inter-district departments and district departments are currently being implemented on the Kazakh stretch of the border. Twenty facilities are being built. Our basic approach to the construction of border infrastructure is to build service housing at the same time as administrative buildings, so that border guards can perform their duties without any worries," Pronichev said.⁹ NATO and leading members of the Alliance are already engaged in providing border security assistance to Kazakhstan, yet such arrangements with Moscow, while welcome from the point of view that they improve the security of the border areas, could complicate efforts aimed at professionalizing and rooting out internal corruption within Kazakhstan's border service. There is a sense that Moscow seeks to ensure the continued dependence of Kazakh security structures on Russia by providing such assistance.¹⁰

Energy and economic cooperation will continue to underpin the bilateral security relations between Russia and Kazakhstan for many

⁸ "Russia and Kazakhstan Integrating CIS Space—Putin," *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, October 3 2006.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ "FSB offers Help for Kazakhstan's Border Troops," *Interfax-Russia*, October 4 2006.

years. Energy has also become the hallmark of Russian diplomacy within the CIS, and Russia's presidency of the G8 signals a neighbor with which Nazarbayev must do business. The mutual interests of Russia's Vneshekonombank and Kazakhstan's Development Bank further underscore the importance of cooperation.

Putin's belief that Russia and Kazakhstan are "locomotives" for integration processes within the former Soviet space will set strict limits on how far Astana can cooperate with NATO.

Diplomacy in Brussels

The senior echelons of Kazakhstan's diplomatic machine are reaffirming the government's intention to closely cooperate with NATO following President Nursultan Nazarbayev's re-election on December 4, 2005. Foreign Minister Tokayev discussed such cooperation during a meeting with Schaeffer in Brussels, on December 7, 2005. "Having given a high assessment of the level of partnership achieved between the country and NATO, Schaeffer expressed his readiness to give Kazakhstan all-round assistance in deepening dialogue with NATO and its member states in issues relating to global and regional security and reforming the armed forces," according to the Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry.¹¹ Schaeffer, for his part, assessed positively the recent trend towards closer partnership ties with NATO. Kazakhstan has shown a willingness to deepen its partnership in the military sphere, as well as in areas of civil emergencies and scientific cooperation. Schaeffer particularly identified the steps taken by the Kazakh government to pave the way for greater practical cooperation with NATO, based on its legislative amendments in September that allow more security cooperation with the Alliance. He praised the use of the NATO +1 format for helping to guide and deepen the nature of Kazakhstan's partnership and the work towards developing a transit agreement with NATO to assist in stabilizing Afghanistan. Tokayev exploited the worsening state of relations generally between the Alliance and Uzbekistan in the aftermath of the Andijan revolt in May 2005; Kazakhstan capitalized on this turn of events, without necessarily making concessions.

During a visit to Kazakhstan in early October, 2005 Ambassador Robert Simmons, Special Representative of the NATO Secretary-General for the Caucasus and Central Asia, denied any need or existing plans for NATO bases in Kazakhstan or elsewhere in the Caspian region. "Currently there are no sites or bases of NATO in Kazakhstan, and I do

¹¹ "Tokayev Holds Meeting With NATO Officials," *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, December 8 2005.

not see any need to change this situation,” Simmons confirmed in an interview in Almaty on October 4, 2005.¹²

Simmons proposed that NATO's Pfp PARP project could include setting up a team in 2007 to react to disasters, including those that resulted from the use of weapons of mass destruction or major terrorist incidents. The Kazakhstani team would take part in international rescue operations and serve in international rescue forces. Shalbay Kulmakhanov, Minister of Emergency Situations, appeared to support these initiatives and presented a united front among Kazakhstan's officials that seems to herald a new chapter in cooperation with the Alliance.¹³

Simmons believes that Kazakhstan can now access courses, which would result in clear benefits to the Kazakhstani armed forces, positively encouraging the Ministry of Defense (MoD) in Almaty to engage in these avenues of cooperation.¹⁴

Other initiatives within the NATO planning staffs have signaled the growing nature of relations with Kazakhstan. NATO has appointed Tugay Tuncer as its special representative on communication and cooperation with Central Asian countries. “We have just appointed him. He will be based in Kazakhstan and will be traveling a lot between Almaty and Astana. He will work not only with the Kazakh government but also with the other governments in the region,” Simmons told a news conference in Almaty on October 4, 2005.¹⁵

NATO planners had long pondered the question of the exact location of an officer within the region, seeking to avoid the impression of favoring any one state, even briefly toying with the idea of an itinerant liaison rather than a single-location option. “Literally all the Central Asian states, except for Uzbekistan, agreed to work with him and welcomed him in their capitals.” It ends a period of speculation, but comes at a time when it may well be interpreted as a sign that Washington and Brussels are happier in promoting multilateral security cooperation with Central Asia through Kazakhstan.¹⁶

Breakthrough: NATO's “Anchor in Central Asia”

In January 2006, Kazakhstani defense officials met with NATO officials in order to conclude an individual partnership action plan (IPAP),

¹² “NATO Representative Says No Bases Planned for Kazakhstan,” *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, October 4 2005.

¹³ “NATO Ambassador Simmons Seeks Practical Programme for Kazakhstan,” *Khabar Television*, October 5 2005.

¹⁴ “NATO Appraises Kazakhstan Partnership Highly,” *Kazinform*, October 6 2005.

¹⁵ “NATO Representative Says No Bases Planned for Kazakhstan,” *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, October 4 2005.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

forming the basis of all future cooperation between NATO and Kazakhstan. "A meeting of the military-political leading committee in the NATO-Kazakhstan format discussed and prepared for final approval the individual partnership action plan, a document that harmonizes all aspects of practical interaction and dialogue between Kazakhstan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," according to an official Kazakhstani MoD press release.¹⁷

The IPAP signed with NATO marks genuine progress in relations between Kazakhstan and NATO. Yet, with the complexity of Central Asian politics and Kazakhstan's ties to Russia and the regional multilateral security bodies, there are clear limits on how far it can pursue military and security links with NATO. These are appreciated in western capitals, but there are often unrealistic expectations on how far Astana may be willing to deepen its partnership with NATO.

The Kazakhstani delegation visited Brussels from January 9-12, 2006. Lieutenant-General Bulat Sembinov, Deputy Defense Minister, who attended a session of the NATO-Kazakhstan military-political committee at the NATO Headquarters in Brussels on January 10, led the delegation. Sembinov met Alessandro Minuto Rizzo, NATO Deputy Secretary General, Robert Simmons, and other high-ranking NATO officials. During these meetings, NATO officials were keen to praise Kazakhstan for the leading role it is now playing in developing security within Central Asia, a comment that could be interpreted both as disapproval of Uzbekistan and marking the opening of an effort to solidify Kazakhstan as the linchpin in the Alliance's Central Asian policy.¹⁸

The IPAP itself—heralded as unique in Western relations with Central Asia—seeks practical ways of strengthening regional and international security, deepening the processes of transformation of the Kazakhstani armed forces, raising operational compatibility, and improving cooperation in science, emergency civil planning, environmental protection and counter-terrorism.

The Partnership Goal Report and the draft 2006 Partnership Goal package formed the basis for the discussions. Much attention was focused on the Kazakhstan Peacekeeping Battalion (KAZBAT), which is part of the Airmobile Forces. Kazakhstan continues to aim at making KAZBAT interoperable and deployable for participation in NATO-led PfP operations by the end of 2006. In addition, work is progressing to train and equip one brigade of the Airmobile Forces to enable it to participate in international operations. It is intended that the brigade will be ready by 2010 and will likely be used to sustain one battalion on operations. The brigade would be available for NATO, and also for other operations, such

¹⁷ "Kazakhstan-NATO Cooperation Document Drafted," *Interfax-Russia*, January 13 2006.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

as those of the UN. One of the main problems in this process is military language training. An attempt to resolve this problem was the creation, in 2005, of the Military Institute for Foreign Languages in Almaty, with branches in four other cities in Kazakhstan. The Institute conducts five-year education programs for its cadets, preparing specialists in military information and analysis, as well as language training for the armed forces personnel. There are plans to open the Institute for students from other countries by 2008. Kazakhstan also plans to establish a regional PfP training center at the Institute by around 2010. This project has been included in the IPAP. It is also part of the Kazakhstan - U.S. five-year cooperation plan (2003-08).¹⁹

Significantly, in the view of NATO representatives, “Kazakhstan has the best IPAP among the Alliance's partner countries. Kazakhstan, Sweden and Finland are our strongest partners. Kazakhstan is the most important country for NATO in Central Asia,” according to a NATO official.²⁰ “Kazakhstan did not have enough defense budgets to ensure planning. We can help Kazakhstan with analyses and planning in the defense sphere. The IPAP provides for the development of the long-term planning process in Kazakhstan's defense sector so that the country can take part in combat activities with NATO forces,” the Alliance's representative said.

Ensuring the future involvement of Kazakhstan's armed forces in NATO operations means that the Kazakhstani armed forces must develop their military English language capabilities. “Kazakhstan has made quite good progress on this. There is a military institute of foreign languages at the Defense Ministry in Almaty,” according to a source in NATO. Kazakhstan has also allocated the Kazakh peacekeeping battalion (KAZBAT) to take part in future NATO operations. The work will be deepened until the setting up of a Kazakh peacekeeping brigade (KAZBRIG) by 2010.

It is unclear, however, at what point in the future and under what circumstances Kazakhstani servicemen may participate in NATO operations. “Currently Kazakhstan is ready to take part using an infantry company. They [servicemen] already speak English. Before tackling the issue of Kazakhstan's involvement in NATO operations it is necessary to study issues relating to the airlifting of servicemen from the country and providing rear support to KAZBAT,” explained a NATO official.²¹

¹⁹ This five-year plan framework has been the subject of recent negotiations between Kazakhstani and U.S. defense officials. By February 2007, it was becoming clear that talks are making progress on the content of a new five-year plan for the period 2008-13. Author interviews with Kazakhstani Defense Officials, Almaty, February 2007.

²⁰ “Kazakhstan-NATO Cooperation Document Drafted,” *Interfax-Russia*, January 13 2006.

²¹ *Ibid.*

The IPAP provides for the strengthening of cooperation between both sides in combating terrorism, exchanging information on legislative initiatives, supporting a policy of good neighborliness and cooperation with other international organizations. NATO intends to provide assistance in expanding public control over the country's armed forces, particularly the parliament's control over the defense sphere, to promote civil-military reform. The IPAP also covers issues relating to Kazakhstan's political reform. It provides for cooperation in fighting corruption; promoting human rights issues; supporting democracy; ensuring the supremacy of law; developing scientific research and a number of other spheres. NATO's assessment of Kazakhstan's political reforms within the IPAP is rather limited, though it is hoped this may evolve over time.²²

General Sembinov has done much to foster the strengthening of Kazakhstan's relations with the Alliance, yet he has become arguably less pro-active in the pursuit of military reform than he was in 2004. These developments at NATO HQ must therefore be regarded with caution; before further funding is released to support Kazakhstani military reform, more information is needed by its Western donors on the progress and use of those officers sent for military education and training. In this sense, the picture that emerges may differ from the ease of expedient agreements on paper. Kazakhstan needs to open its military manning system to allow greater alumni tracking by its international security assistance providers. All too often Kazakhstani officers return to the country only to be regarded with suspicion by colleagues, or simply undervalued.

Unfortunately, for an Alliance with limited experience with Central Asian governments, limited and restricted contact with the indigenous militaries, and an acute awareness of Russia's sensitivity toward its traditional sphere of influence, such moves need to be supported by concrete measures. Military reform in Kazakhstan has often taken a course that oddly mirrors Astana's relations with the West, China and Russia, including its ongoing involvement in the regional multilateral bodies (CSTO and SCO). Sembinov, once committed to reform and the pursuit of closer ties with the West as potential partners in this process, has become embroiled within Kazakhstani politics and recognized the extreme shifts in regional relations with the West following the expulsion of U.S. forces from Uzbekistan. Moreover, following the Kazakhstani presidential elections, senior officers in Kazakhstan have privately questioned the reality of Sembinov's commitment to military reform; the safe option is re-alignment with the Russian arms industry

²² "NATO Upbeat on Expanding Ties With Kazakhstan," *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, April 3 2006.

and confirmation of Kazakhstan's growing energy and political ties with Russia.

There is little doubt regarding the significant role played by Altynbayev in building stronger ties with NATO and seeking ways to foster a closer relationship with the Alliance. In many ways, this was always limited to certain priorities set by Altynbayev and his military background strongly influenced the type of assistance he wanted from the West. He was often rather vague on specifics, and downplayed the need to properly coordinate the MoD staffs in developing their cooperation plans and goals with NATO.

Altynbayev has also sought to dispel concerns in the West that the army could be deployed internally against opponents of the regime. "The army will never go against the people but against the bandit formations. Those who want to break the constitutional order of our state. This will never happen: the army will put a barrier to this," he intimated. Kazakhstan in his view will be different; the constitutional order under threat will not justify the use of armed force.²³ Indeed, Altynbayev denied rumors that the army had been placed on standby on the day of the presidential election. Altynbayev committed himself to Western cooperation and took a considerable risk for this. In so doing, he was intent on proving that his country will transform itself into a reliable Western security partner in the region.²⁴

Much of the work of ironing out the finer details, as well as encouraging the various factions within the Kazakhstani MoD to pursue genuine partnership goals with the Alliance was placed on General Sembinov, the Deputy Defense Minister tasked with overseeing cooperation with the West.²⁵ Here Sembinov's role must not be underestimated; his Soviet background in the Navy, particularly in the Caspian fleet, supplied a ready made interest in promoting an aspect of Western cooperation very close to the economic interests of the regime and the country's future: Caspian security.

In terms of personalities, Sembinov has played a very important role in the area of Kazakhstan's military cooperation with the West, seeing his involvement in the planning of the Kazakhstan-U.S. five-year military cooperation plan, and its linkage to an agreement with Turkey through which this was elevated to a trilateral agreement. One central theme in this cooperation strategy is the support given by the U.S. and Turkey in developing Kazakhstan's military infrastructure on the Caspian coast, aimed at enhancing the security of its energy interests.

²³ "Army Will Not Abuse Power," *Kazakh-Channel* 31, December 8 2005.

²⁴ "Kazakhstan Committed to Stronger Ties With NATO—Altynbayev," *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, April 25 2005.

²⁵ Author Interviews With Western and Kazakhstani Defense Officials, July 2004/October 2006.

Sembinov's task has however, proven arduous. Competing and volatile factions within the MoD have been difficult to handle, control and manage; he has been constantly aware of the continued presence of 'old Soviets' or simply those utterly opposed to developing stronger security ties with the West. Having emerged from a trying period, where Kazakhstan has balanced these forces within its MoD and built a strong basis for future NATO cooperation, perhaps there needs to be concerted effort to avoid these relations being subject to the whims of personalities or the tendency of some officials to drag their feet, or say one thing to Western counterparts, while telling a different story to the Russian MoD. One way this could be achieved structurally, would be to form a department within the MoD specifically tasked with cooperation and partnership with NATO; but this would also require careful and skilful use of manpower. Officers with experience in Western military education and training could be adequately utilized in such a key department. However, for such ventures to succeed, strong and ongoing political support from the leadership of the regime itself is necessary.

Future NATO-Kazakhstan Relations

The main theme advanced in this paper has been that the relationship between Kazakhstan and NATO has deepened considerably as a result of 9/11, Kazakhstan's role in Peace Support Operations (PSO) in Iraq and Nazarbayev's capitalization on the rupture in NATO's relations with neighboring Uzbekistan after the events in Andijan in May 2005. NATO officials were careful to avoid any possible hint that it favored one nation in the region, and maintained a balance in its relations with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan not wishing to stimulate regional rivalry. Unofficially, NATO has now recognized that *de facto*, its relations with Kazakhstan have far eclipsed those with Uzbekistan, regarding the former as more stable and reliable. Uzbekistan's diplomatic efforts to restore military and security assistance ties with the West have failed to date, recently not being able to persuade the EU to lift sanctions imposed on Tashkent. Warmer relations in the future between Uzbekistan and NATO will do little to catch up with the advances currently being made by Kazakhstan. The latter has seized an opportunity to become NATO's anchor in Central Asia, showing no signs of abating.

Russia and China will provide constant pressure on Kazakhstan not to go "too far" in the evolving relationship with NATO, but neither will object too much over improvements in key Kazakhstani formations tasked with counter-terrorism and building greater security in the Caspian. The U.S. has led the way in bilateral security assistance to Kazakhstan, placing this on a longer-term footing under its first five-year plan. This is currently being negotiated for renewal and will likely see a

new plan emerge that provides continuity in American aid to Kazakhstan' armed forces through the period ending in 2013. Other NATO member states have also developed strong military assistance ties with Kazakhstan, notably Turkey and the United Kingdom. Some of the aims in these cooperation agreements converge and where that synergy is clearest is in helping Kazakhstan to provide rapid response counter-terrorist capabilities, increase the level and eventual interoperability of its PSO forces, while more broadly supporting the reform of the armed forces through training and education initiatives that will raise standards of professionalism within other elements of the military. NATO will do its best in this relationship if it concentrates on developing the niche capabilities of the Kazakhstani armed forces that clearly interest the Alliance planning staffs. PSO, achieving NATO interoperability in key formations, have more achievable potential than the generally reform centric approach.

The Alliance is now gauging for itself the geopolitical restrictions on this relationship, since Kazakhstan remains sensitive to the views of both Russia and China. Its IPAP agreement and goals set for the Kazakhstani armed forces provide a framework upon which the detail of future cooperation and assistance will be constructed. NATO is uniquely placed to help Kazakhstan achieve certain military reform tasks, not least by offering to facilitate these processes by drawing on a wealth of experience of nations in transition since the end of the Cold War.

Kazakhstan needs to define the goals of cooperation with NATO, specifying what it wants from a deeper relationship with the Alliance. This will demand political support from the leadership of the regime in order to overcome the institutional inertia that has slowed down genuine and systemic military reform. Achieving NATO interoperability in some formations will demand a serious and prolonged commitment to overcoming existing problems within the newly formed Military Languages Institute. NATO planners know this will need to be in place, but fail to grasp the potential for the Kazakhstani MoD to either underestimate the task of running this institute properly, or its capacity for simple mismanagement. Kazakhstan must also learn the lessons of why Uzbekistan often gained more from its formerly warmer relationship with NATO, utilizing its liaison staff at NATO HQ to the fullest extent. Kazakhstani officials must now become more proactive, not only in understanding how NATO functions, but in maximizing its diplomatic channels. NATO officials often face Kazakhstani intelligence staff rather than come face-to-face on a regular basis with knowledgeable military officials that can speak with authority and facilitate progress.

Finally, providing Kazakhstan with a real counter-terrorist punch and a genuinely independent means of achieving long-term security and

stability in the Caspian will mean concentrating on two huge tasks, for which a stronger partnership may allow open and free discussion:

- Promoting the systemic reform of Kazakhstan's security structures, especially the intelligence services which are molded and exist in the image of the old KGB. Kazakhstan needs a modernized information system and an intelligence service that is tasked with the analysis of real threats to the state, where intelligence officers can work free from politically skewed mandates.
- Promoting regional security cooperation, which has made progress but still remains weak.

The appointment of Kazakhstan's first civilian Defense Minister, Daniyal Akhmetov, (former Prime Minister) on January 10, 2007 could presage more systemic military reform, or simply prove to be another paper reform that means little in reality other than the political dividend of carrying out an exercise that displays forward, reformist thinking.²⁶ However, if the recent history of Kazakhstan's relations with Western security assistance partners and the Alliance is to be understood properly, Akhmetov may well play a critical role in the follow up work to what Altynbayev has achieved as Defense Minister. Much work remains on both sides, involving difficult challenges, but the possible security dividends are enormous: supporting NATO's publicly declared long-term security interests in the Caucasus and Central Asia and possibly contributing to forming an "arc of stability" extending from the Euro-Atlantic to Central Asia and the Middle East. In any case, despite the problems and difficulties ahead, Kazakhstan appears politically prepared to engage in international PSO's under the umbrella of NATO or the UN, confirming that its commitment to such operations goes beyond the high publicity of yielding support for Operation Enduring Freedom. Planning staffs in NATO and within Central Asia must now take into account that Kazakhstan has emerged as NATO's key partner in the region, constructing detailed plans to capitalize on this relationship—without upsetting Russia or China. This may entail future multilateral cooperation between the Alliance, the CSTO and the SCO, as well as using Kazakhstan to attract more interest in promoting regional security reform and cooperation. Although the CSTO has made overtures towards developing a multilateral security dialogue with NATO, the Alliance has preferred instead to conduct its diplomacy directly with each Central Asian state. As these relationships evolve, multilateral

²⁶ "Kazakh President Explain Rationale For Appointing Civilian as Defense Minister," Khabar TV, January 10 2007.

mechanisms must be utilized to the fullest in order to defuse any sense of these bodies competing or clashing in the region. Since Kazakhstan remains a full and active participant within the CSTO, its deepening partnership with NATO may arouse less criticism if the Alliance can form a multilateral dialogue with the CSTO.