

NATO in Central Asia: In Search of Regional Harmony

The events in Andijon in May 2005 precipitated a significant deterioration of relations between Central Asian republics and the West, while at the same time enhancing Russian and Chinese positions in the region. Enhancing Western position in the region will require a more coordinated and systematic approach, as well as a transparent policy implementation process. NATO should serve as primary vehicle in building deeper ties with the region. Furthermore NATO should explore possibilities for multilateral engagement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Turning NATO – SCO cooperation into a functioning multilateral mechanism would greatly enhance regional ability to address short-term and long-term security threats as well as build a level of trust between participating members resulting in real, enduring security gains.

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Following the fall of the Soviet Union, Western engagement in Central Asia expanded into political, economic, security spheres. The West, which for practical purposes can be broadly defined to encompass the U.S., NATO and the EU, has an assortment of objectives and varied engagements in the region. These include enhancement of military cooperation (conducted through NATO's Partnership for Peace program), operation of military bases in support of the mission in Afghanistan, increasing interest in energy resources and business opportunities, as well as promotion of democracy and human rights. Up to 2005 most Central Asian countries kept a largely open door policy to Western engagement, viewing U.S. and NATO intervention deposing the Taliban in Afghanistan as a security gain for the region, and influx of other aid and technical support as an added benefit. However, a divergence in perceptions of security and governance raised suspicions and mistrust of Western governments and civil society organizations. After the events in Andijon in May 2005, relations deteriorated significantly. Interaction between the West and countries in the region became increasingly strained, while relations with Russia and China improved. Even with its direct role diminished, Western presence carries significant weight in the sense that its actions and perceived interests are taken into consideration by other regional powers, hence exert an indirect impact on regional dynamics. The Central Asian republics are interested in expanding cooperation with the West primarily in the area of security. Translating this 'soft power' into actual influence will require a more coordinated and systematic approach and steady engagement.

While at the core of the Western value system, democracy and human rights are particularly sensitive and contentious topics for the countries in the region. Fixation with promotion of these issues in a manner that Central Asian countries find threatening and/or degrading has proven counter-productive. At the same time unwillingness to engage on other issues is equally detrimental, depriving the West of much of its influence and ability to spur positive developmental trends in a region which is undergoing rapid transformational changes and where U.S., NATO and EU involvement have already contributed to regional security. Building stronger links between the West and Central Asian is key. Its scope and success will depend on the West taking a pragmatic approach as well as making its policy and policy implementation process more transparent.

The Benefits of Competition: Beyond the Great Game

Eurasia is a region in which the U.S., China and Russia operate in great proximity, hence the interaction between these main powers will play a key role in regional political, economic and security trends. The dynamic, which is laden with competition, has also opened a window of opportunity for closer cooperation particularly on a multilateral level.

Western bilateral and multilateral engagement in the region has in part brought the two regional powers Russia and China into closer cooperation. The evolution of the SCO into

an increasingly effective regional mechanism can, among other things, be attributed to the perceived need to counter an amplified U.S. role in the region in the 1990s and particularly after 9/11. Russia's closer cooperation with China is, however, a derivative of its relationship with the West rather than an expression of a deeper strategic partnership with China. As a regional mechanism for cooperation on key threats and enhancement of security the SCO has the potential for playing an important role. However, it is unlikely that it would turn into a NATO-like organization. Its members do not share common values and lack mutual interests for such integration. Hence its limitations provide a window of opportunity for Western engagement on a multilateral level.

For Central Asian republics Western engagement enhances their maneuvering space in relation to the two competing regional powers and boosts their ability to pursue their policy interest independent of the big players. The ability to balance competing objectives thus affords the Central Asian countries an opportunity to advance cooperation through multilateral regional mechanisms such as the SCO.

How and Where to Engage

Successfully exploring and developing the windows of opportunity for closer cooperation will require a strategic approach through a suitable mechanism. While U.S. engagement yielded a number of positive outcomes, it is also viewed with great suspicion in large part due to its perceived connection to the color revolutions. Furthermore the U.S., while labeling the region as one of strategic importance, does not place Central Asia on its list of top priorities. For the EU the stakes are higher; developments in the region have real and direct consequences for European security. While the EU has a greater predisposition for engagement, it has been rather slow at reaching out to the region. The German and in part French efforts have been the driving forces of EU engagement in the region. Even with the newly adopted EU Central Asia strategy, its efforts are still dominated by short-term considerations rather than a broader strategic vision. The EU is yet to become a regional player.

NATO, on the other hand, has a history of successful work in the region and should serve as the primary vehicle of cooperation and Western engagement in Central Asia. Central Asia remains an out-of-area region for NATO, which has worked in Central Asia primarily through the Partnership for Peace program. The SCO does not make NATO any less attractive to the countries in Central Asia. A strengthened relationship with NATO could provide a number of benefits to the countries in the region, such as access to know-how and technology, as well as enhanced regional cooperation on security issues. For the West, cooperation in the military sphere and military assistance could have added benefits in that they go beyond equipment and capabilities upgrades to encompass broader cooperation and reform with the underlying ambition to instill into the region ideas of civilian control of the military thus amending the regional governance structures.

Pragmatism Goes a Long Way

The expression *'it is not what you do, but how you do it'* carries particular significance with regards to NATO's approach in Central Asia. The reaction of regional powers to increased NATO engagement in large part depends on 'who is fronting the debate'. In Central Asia increased U.S. involvement is viewed with suspicion. Furthermore Central Asian countries are weary of any increase of presence of U.S. troops on their borders or in the region. Any developments that may precipitate an upsurge of U.S. presence are unwelcome and would result in significant backlashes from the bigger regional players.

A debate on enhanced NATO engagement fronted by the U.S. would no doubt exacerbate, not soothe, tensions. However, if other NATO partners such as Germany or France, were to take the lead on NATO initiatives in Central Asia then NATO's role becomes less controversial. For instance the discourse on missile defense is much more focused on U.S.-Russia relations, then the fact that it is actually an initiative to be conducted under the NATO umbrella. Russia is less reactionary to German or French involvement in the region. While the U.S. was pressured into closing the Karshi-Khanabad airbases in Uzbekistan, Germany is operating a military base in that country today. Given that German military goes hand in hand with NATO, by that token NATO effectively has one foot in Uzbekistan. This is neither widely discussed nor is it a point of contention. Germans have shown that pragmatic diplomacy can go a long way in the region.

NATO and SCO

The SCO is developing into an effective regional forum for addressing security, social, as well as economic considerations. It is quite conceivable to envision common interests and consequentially development of a cooperative relationship between NATO and the SCO. The developing situations in Afghanistan and Pakistan are of grave concern to Central Asian states, which are weary of destabilizing spill-over effects throughout the region. Regional conflicts, state failure and organized crime remain serious threats, while the ability of these states to cope with security challenges remains weak. A need for outside assistance is recognized, making NATO an attractive partner. In that respect regional actors are not averse to an enhanced role for NATO in the region.

NATO on the other hand may benefit from regional support regarding Afghanistan. All SCO members are engaged in Afghanistan. Cooperation among them and NATO may yield benefits for the situation on the ground as well as enhance understanding between these players.

Until now NATO has engaged in the region on a bi-lateral level only. While this element is essential and valuable, multilateral engagement on particular issues would complement NATO's efforts in the region. This is true particularly for cross-border challenges such as narcotics trafficking and the spread of radical ideology. NATO should build a strong partnership with Russia and China as well as other regional players in order to achieve real, long-term security gains. Turning NATO – SCO cooperation into a functioning

multilateral mechanism would greatly enhance regional ability to address short-term and long-term security threats as well as build a level of trust between participating members.

Strategic Vision and Policy Transparency

While the U.S. and EU broad interest in the region are for the most part complementary, the lack of a common strategic vision or a pragmatic approach has impeded such engagement. Policy formation and implementation is conducted by a variety of stakeholders such as civil society, government, international organizations, lobby groups, and the private sector. The interaction between them is neither linear nor consistent. Governments at times use civil society as their vehicle to implement a policy while other times these elements exert control over policy priorities in the U.S. and the EU. The process of setting policy priorities and policy implementation is multi-layered and opaque.

From the perspective of countries in Central Asia, Western policy-making and implementation, which at times reaching into the depths of the Central Asian domestic politics, is far from transparent. The color revolutions were the drop over the edge in the willingness of these countries to keep an open door policy to Western institutions, particularly the Western civil society. Increasing restrictions on NGOs and other organizations supporting democratic reform are a shift from the previous welcoming of outside assistance. The regimes calculated if the cost of Western support, which came with a requirement of reforms, was their own demise then this cost outweighs the benefits of such engagement.

Ironically Central Asian republics perceive Russian and Chinese interests in the region as more transparent in this respect. The West needs to form and cooperate on key policies in a manner that is more transparent and pragmatic in terms of allowing dialogue, cooperation and engagement, to play a serious role in the region. Transparency will allay fears Central Asian countries have of the U.S. concept of regime change, as well as allow for greater cooperation between regional powers, the U.S. and EU, and soothe the possible push back from Russia and China.

NATO is the most suitable organization to begin building deeper ties with the region. It has the ability to address security needs of the region and has direct benefits for European security. NATO should explore possibilities of multilateral cooperation with the SCO as both organizations have much to gain by building closer ties.