

# Important force for stability

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**K**azakhstan's role in assisting international stabilization efforts in Afghanistan is often underestimated in western commentaries. The precise nature of that assistance, cooperation with key actors, and level of partnership with NATO can be prone to underestimation, not least due to the tendency to prioritize the role of Russia in the international cooperative matrix. These issues convey subtle changes in foreign and defense policy in Astana which may have deeper implications for future peace support or counter insurgency operations. Astana actively seeks – on its own terms – ways and mechanisms in which the country might cooperate at a practical level with its western partners on issues of mutual though not identical interests, as part of a process allowing it to develop a greater international role for itself. Twenty years after gaining its independence, Kazakhstan like other states in Central Asia, is becoming a more clearly identifiable independent actor both in the region and globally.

During its first twenty years as an independent state, Kazakhstan's achievements have mirrored the level of ambition and vision for its future development widely shared by its ruling elite. These include the abandonment of the nuclear weapons arsenal inherited from the Soviet Union, its commitment to nuclear non-proliferation, development of its natural resources and in 2010 Kazakhstan became the first Eurasian state to chair the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The country has experienced significant change during this period, and continues to do so, marked not least by its strategic partnership signed with China in June 2011 and setting the target for Sino-Kazakh bilateral trade at US\$40 billion by 2015.

While the country's cooperation with NATO and assistance to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan in no sense implies any belief in a military solution to the problem of Afghan security, the drivers behind such cooperative strategies offer potentially invaluable insight into Astana's political will to more readily participate in international peace support or other operations or initiatives.

## **NATO-Kazakhstan: a Growing Partnership?**

Any political-military analysis of Kazakhstan's evolving relationship with NATO through Partnership for Peace (PfP) activities and where this might lead in the

future, must begin by identifying the factors that limit the bounds of this relationship. Crucially, western policy makers and NATO planning staff all too often underestimate the fact that Kazakhstan is a Eurasian power. This is not only clear in terms of its geographical location, or political relations with its powerful neighbors such as Russia or China and its trade ties to these powers as well as others including the European Union and the United States, but also in terms of self perception. The published work of Kazakhstani experts is replete with reference to this Eurasian context, and naturally it also permeates the thinking of governmental institutions. Consequently, the political leadership in Astana often refers to the country as a bridge between East and West. Viewing the country through a Euro-Atlantic prism, therefore, tends to inherently restrict the potential scope for developing deeper understanding and strengthening ties.

Astana has managed these complex processes without damaging ties with its allies. This may be a product of the country's leadership remaining committed to a "multi-vector" foreign policy, but in reality it is more complex. Decision makers in Astana identify the scope for manoeuvre in balancing the country's national interests, assessing the various influences of close allies and other powers, and implement policy accordingly.

As illustrated in the table (opposite) Kazakhstan has made significant progress in its cooperation with NATO, aspects of which are unique within the region. These PfP arrangements were propelled forward in the aftermath of the meta-terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001 (9/11) and the resulting "War on Terror," while at a regional level in 2005 following the decision by Tashkent to close the US military base at Kharshi-Khanabad (K2) as relations between the US and Uzbekistan deteriorated. These processes were complex and underway in 2004, with Astana expressing greater interest in entering IPAP. While the former catalyst led to Kazakhstan joining the NATO Planning and Review Process (PARP) in 2002, the latter regional shift in 2005 also precipitated the Alliance refocusing its cooperation efforts in Central Asia away from Uzbekistan and towards Kazakhstan. The US was also in transition from prioritizing Uzbekistan as an operational-strategic focus in the war of terror, shifting towards Kazakhstan as a geo-strategic or geopolitical regional priority. Consequently, by

2006 this intensification culminated in Kazakhstan signing the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) marking a deepening of Astana's cooperation with the Alliance across a whole range of activities.

Signing the IPAP agreement in 2006 represented a highly significant step, not least since Kazakhstan became the first country in Central Asia to cooperate with NATO at this level. Although Kazakhstan's military doctrine (2007) mentions the Alliance in the context of other regional and international multilateral organizations it did indicate areas in which it would cooperate with the Alliance, albeit vaguely framed. This was also linked as a driver in developing defense and security ties with the US, UK, Germany and Turkey as NATO members, and envisaged the PfP cooperation influencing security, military-technical issues, and the country's international military cooperation.

Participation in PARP acted as a mechanism by which Alliance standards and procedures were encouraged to influence reform, force structure and training in Kazakhstan's armed forces. Astana's participation in PfP through a variety of partnership mechanisms and in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) provides opportunities to hold political dialogue with NATO and coordinate its cooperation in areas as diverse as peacekeeping, military reform, prevention of emergencies and environmental protection. Specialists in Kazakhstan have noted that Washington acted as a powerful driving force in these processes, and indeed its willingness to sign five-year bilateral cooperation plans with the US indicated longer-term planning

commitment to such partnerships and by implication a deeper interest in NATO.

These factors related to the US and its allies actively developing alternative supply lines for their forces deployed in Afghanistan, as the Pakistan route proved to be increasingly vulnerable, in addition to efforts to persuade Astana to send military forces to Afghanistan. Agreement in principle for Kazakhstan to support opening the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) as an additional route to replenish supplies to deployed forces in theater initiated a period of intense negotiation and fulfilling domestic ratification processes both on the NDN and contributing to ISAF.

#### **The Northern Distribution Network: Kazakhstan's Role and assistance**

Kazakhstan's relationship with NATO and its assistance to ISAF in Afghanistan markedly increased in 2008-2010 due to the exposure of military supply lines through Pakistan into Afghanistan to attacks by the Taliban and local pilferage. The underlying cooperative dynamics between Astana and the Alliance are likely to endure for many years, not least in terms of efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. US Department of Defence (DoD) agencies such as United States Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM) had relied heavily on moving cargo for forces deployed in Afghanistan using the Pakistan Ground Line of Communications (PAKGLOC). In September 2008, US Central Command (CENTCOM) approved an alternative GLOC and following successfully testing

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#### **Milestones in the NATO-Kazakhstan Partnership**

1992	Kazakhstan joins the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, renamed the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council in 1997
1995	Kazakhstan officially joins the Partnership for Peace (PfP)
2002	Kazakhstan is connected to the Virtual Silk Highway. Kazakhstan joins the PfP Planning and Review Process (PARP).
2004	At the Istanbul Summit, Allied leaders place special focus on Central Asia – a special NATO representative and a liaison officer are assigned to the region.
2005	Kazakhstan delivers its IPAP presentation document to NATO
2006	Kazakhstan and NATO agree on Kazakhstan's first IPAP, covering the 2006-2008 period, and on its current set of 2006 Partnership Goals in the PARP
2007	The President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, visits NATO HQ The 2007 PARP Assessment documents the state of implementation of Partnership Goals The NATO Science Partnership Prize for 2007 is awarded to two scientists from Kazakhstan and the United Kingdom for excellent collaboration on assessing radioactive contamination at the nuclear test site at Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan, which was operated by the former Soviet Union The NATO Information Center opens at the Al Farabi University
2008	NATO depository library is inaugurated at the National Library Kazakh Defence Minister, Daniyal Akhmetov, visits NATO Headquarters and briefs the North Atlantic Council on the IPAP results for the period of 2006-2008

Source: NATO

**In December 2008, a bilateral agreement in principle was reached between Washington and Astana for Kazakhstan to participate in the NDN**

Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen addresses a joint news conference at the NATO headquarters in Brussels

the route, by May 2009 it became operational. The surge policy long mooted and finally announced by US President Barack Obama on December 1, 2009 to boost US forces in ISAF by more than 30,000 troops only added additional impetus to reactivate and develop NDN routes to Afghanistan through Central Asia, originating from seaports in the Baltic States. In December 2008, a bilateral agreement in principle was reached between Washington and Astana for Kazakhstan to participate in the NDN. The sheer complexity of devising and implementing such intricate networks, with the bilateral and multilateral level agreements required in each of the transit countries naturally often resulted in misperception and diplomatic shortcomings.

The NDN has several points of origin: the Latvian port of Riga, Tallinn (Estonia), Klaipeda (Lithuania) as well as the Turkish port of Mersin and the Georgian port of Poti. From northern Germany and the Baltic States, the route known as the Russian route moves cargo south through Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan prior to reaching Afghanistan. Within Central Asia, an additional option to taking supplies through Uzbekistan is the Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (KKT) spur. The Mersin route joins the South Caucasus route (where supplies can originate from Belgium) at the Black Sea port of Poti (Georgia) while supplies transit Azerbaijan, the Caspian Sea, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. There are also key nodes and Air Lines of Communications (ALOC) involved in the NDN (shown on the map). Yet, a number of additional observations should be noted concerning the complexity of the NDN before considering issues from Astana's perspective.

Clearly, Russia's participation is crucial to the successful functioning of the NDN, though one and technically two NDN routes do bypass Russia. Uzbekistan is considered by specialists on the NDN such as Thomas Sanderson to be the "fulcrum" of the route, as much of the cargo passes through the country before crossing into Afghanistan at Termez in southern Uzbekistan; specifically two routes transit supplies in the NDN using Uzbekistan (or three if the less used Trans-Siberian spur is included). However, the Russian route hinges on access across Kazakhstan's territory. Moreover, Kazakhstan features twice (Russian route and KKT, though the latter is less frequently used) and technically four times (Mersin/South Caucasus routes, including US European Command (EUCOM)/DLA truck deliveries through the South Caucasus) or five if the Trans-Siberian route is also included. Different road and rail options within the countries active in these NDN routes make the GLOC truly networked and complex.

During a plenary session of the Senate, the upper house of Kazakhstan's parliament, on April 14, 2011, approval was finally given to the draft law ratifying the agreement reached between Astana and Washington in relation to the NDN, signed on November 12, 2010. On May 3, 2011, President Nazarbayev signed the bill into law, which allows the air transit of cargo and military personnel through Kazakhstan for operations in Afghanistan. Until this ratification, US cargo transited Kazakhstan under memoranda of understanding between the two governments signed on December 15, 2001 and June 10, 2002, which had facilitated approximately 10,000 flights.

Such legislation was also important in the context of the shifting balance between the NDN and PAKGLOC, since by March 2011 the level of supplies through the NDN increased from 30 per cent to 50 per cent: Kazakhstan's participation is now enshrined in law. This may well further scale back dependence on the PAKGLOC and seems to provide ample testimony to the successful development of the NDN including through Central Asian nodes such as Navoi airport in Uzbekistan, using South Korean airlines to transit goods and personnel to Afghanistan. Further shifting the supply route balance in favor of the NDN, with increased commercial activity and infrastructure projects in the region, is set to grow to as much as 75 per cent by late 2011 as a result of Washington's plans to expand NDN through negotiating expanded agreements with key Central Asian participants.

**Kazakhstan's Peace Support Operations Capabilities and potential**

Since 2003, the focus of NATO's training assistance to Kazakhstan has centred upon developing the country's





Peace Support Operations (PSO) capabilities. This envisaged training in-country on a “train-the-trainers” basis with members of Kazakhstan’s peacekeeping battalion (KAZBAT) raising standards and progressing towards such force elements becoming NATO interoperable. In this formative period, US planning staff also considered that such initiatives may enhance Kazakhstan’s abilities to respond to a crisis in the Caspian coast. This in itself involved considerable commitment on the part of the US and UK as well as reciprocation by Kazakhstan and extending to include annual trilateral military exercises, *Steppe Eagle*, which allowed the level of progress in KAZBAT to be monitored and assessed. The US DoD formed bilateral five year military cooperation plans starting in 2003; renewing the program in 2008. Its long-term cooperation goals are: strengthening PSO capabilities, enhancing combat readiness in the air defense forces, developing naval capabilities in the Caspian Sea, forming and supporting the Defence Institute of Foreign Languages and establishing a professional cadre of sergeants. UK defence diplomacy with Kazakhstan is conducted on an annual basis, supporting many of these goals, though less ambitious and more narrowly focused.

NATO sought to assist Kazakhstan to expand its PSO capabilities and potential interoperability by developing the battalion, elements of which were gaining operational experience in a demining role in Iraq, into a fully NATO interoperable brigade (KAZBRIG). This transformation of the country’s PSO potential, still in progress, has caused a great deal of confusion in western expert circles, with some mistakenly claiming that the two entities co-exist (KAZBAT plus KAZBRIG).

These critical and interlinked factors relate to the airmobile forces from which KAZBAT was drawn and NATO’s aspiration to eventually move beyond only one brigade assigned for possible international PSOs and Kazakhstan’s alliance commitments within an evolving CSTO agenda. While Kazakhstan pursued deeper partnership relations with NATO, and demonstrated openness to this policy and benefitted from the military assistance on offer, it also had to finely balance this against its legal obligations within a regional alliance.

NATO defines as a key area of its security cooperation with

Kazakhstan the future development of the country’s PSO capabilities: “Kazakhstan has allocated an airborne assault battalion as a peacekeeping battalion for potential deployment in NATO-led peace support operations, under UN Security Council mandates. Elements of the peacekeeping battalion have joined NATO Allies in a number of live exercises.”

To mitigate the potential problems that might arise in pursuing such cooperation, Astana correctly opted to limit the experiment with NATO interoperability to one air assault brigade drawn from the airmobile forces, as it would simply have proved to be impossible to involve all their air assault brigades in the experiment. At any time during this period, Kazakhstan’s defense ministry planners understood that at least one air assault brigade had to be on standby for possible involvement in CSTO operations. The officer mentality, doctrine, manning, tactics, weapons and equipment could not simultaneously straddle western and Russian approaches to operations.

However, as part of KAZBRIG progressed towards achieving a level of NATO interoperability, pressure mounted from London and Washington for the deployment of a company on a rotational basis in an international PSO. Since KAZBAT ended its deployment in Iraq in 2008, it has been abundantly clear that the nature of such requests at NATO level could mean one important operation: joining ISAF in Afghanistan.

Kazakhstan’s upper house of parliament, the Senate, convened on June 9, 2011 to debate and vote on the possible ratification of the NATO-Kazakhstan agreement on sending officers to participate in ISAF before presenting the bill for presidential signature.

**NATO defines as a key area of its security cooperation with Kazakhstan the future development of the country’s PSO capabilities**

Kazakh troops at the opening ceremony of the Steppe Eagle 2011 joint tactical military exercise, at Ili military range outside Almaty



**Kazakhstani military personnel may in this transition period find themselves working more closely with their Afghan counterparts**

Soldiers from Britain, US and Kazakhstan prepare to raise their national flags before an opening ceremony of the Steppe Eagle joint tactical military exercise

Yet, the vote against the agreement resulted in speculation in Astana and internationally concerning the possible motives underlying the “failure.” Reuters news agency reported the rejection, and highlighted the rare instance of discord between both chambers of parliament, while Russian news agencies stressed that the deal with NATO had been flatly rejected.

Some senators feared that by approving the bill, Kazakhstan’s reputation as a peaceful country may be jeopardized; though such sentiments were evidently rooted in the misapprehension that a combat role was envisaged for Kazakhstani troops. One senator, Svetlana Dzhalmagambetova, certainly based her comments to the media on an assumption that Kazakhstan risked being drawn into the war in Afghanistan. Explaining that the Senate’s “rejection” was the correct decision to make in the circumstances; Dzhalmagambetova said the debate was “heated” and added “The bill would send Kazakhstan slipping gradually into war in Afghanistan. We could not allow that to happen.”

Despite outright opposition to the agreement among some senators, the actual *modus operandi* was technical. Mukhtar Altynbayev, a member of the Senate’s International Affairs, Defence and Security Committee, and former Defence Minister, exhorted senators to follow his lead and vote against the bill. Altynbayev in fact tabled a procedural issue, highlighting point 5, article 53 of the constitution which stipulates that such decisions require a joint session of both chambers. The “rejection” when it

came was neither final nor outright.

Assessed in a wider context of Kazakhstan’s partnership with NATO, commitment to developing its PSO capabilities and the lengthy governmental discussions on joining ISAF, it is likely that a confluence of several factors resulted in senators drawing back from voting in favour. Since the announcement of the political decision to deepen the country’s level of assistance to ISAF in this manner, not only had the issue become more acutely controversial domestically, but the wider context had also changed. Instances of western or Kazakhstani expert opinion either underestimating the significance of the plan to send four officers to Kabul, or wrongly making comparisons with the level of smaller deployments by ISAF members, masked the real political motivations in Astana and deeper complexities in the ratification proving so elusive.

Although there was no evidence that the bombings in Kazakhstan in May 2011 were in any way linked to the Taliban threat in response to the vote by the Majlis, it aroused a level of uncertainty among some senators and demanded at least more time to reexamine any security risks that might be incurred by pursuing the policy. This cautious approach fed into what was ultimately a delayed ratification. It was also becoming clearer that the commitment by the Obama administration to fulfill its promise to begin a gradual withdrawal from Afghanistan and handing over responsibility for the security of the country to the Afghan government was inching towards implementation, despite the divisions

exposed by this policy both among NATO allies and domestically in Alliance capitals.

Kazakhstani military personnel may in this transition period, depending on the length of their commitment, find themselves working more closely with their Afghan counterparts than solely alongside ISAF personnel. It is also worth remembering that while no other Central Asian country has shown genuine interest in either developing NATO interoperable PSO forces or in sending servicemen to Afghanistan, for Astana this was remarkable: it demonstrates that the country is willing to confront past sensitivities and not allow itself to be captive to these or to dissuade the political leadership from participating in international stabilization efforts.






Understanding Astana's level of interest in diversifying and deepening its assistance to OEF and ISAF in Afghanistan since 2008 depends upon a range of factors. These relate to the chronology of its partnership with NATO, its response to shifts in the international security environment after 9/11, the level of its defense cooperation with the US and other Alliance members on a bilateral basis and how Kazakhstan's governmental structures manage these processes within the limits noted earlier. Not only does its geographical location bordering both Russia and China influence Astana's political considerations relating to NATO cooperation, but its close alliance and defense ties with the former serves to frame the political-military scope for such activities. In contrast with Moscow, however, Astana has incrementally built closer ties with NATO, despite these geopolitical limitations.

At a doctrinal level this is reflected in the new military doctrine (2007) especially compared with the earlier version in 2000. During the 1990's NATO cooperation in Central Asia followed Washington's lead and prioritized Uzbekistan, which was transformed in the following decade to placing greater emphasis on Kazakhstan not least due to OEF and fluctuations in US relations in the region. Although reference to the country's defense relationship with the US and its partnership with NATO is placed in the wider scheme of its cooperation with other states or membership of multilateral organizations, Kazakhstan's most recent military doctrine highlights these links more frequently and transparently. Indeed, the doctrine has no negative reference to the Alliance and even mentions "NATO standards" in terms of upgrading or re-equipping elements of its armed forces.

Astana, of course, calibrates its assistance to ISAF primarily on the basis of its own national security interests, in which Afghanistan plays a significant, but by no means determining role. Kazakhstan has consistently eschewed attaching primary place in the stabilization efforts in Afghanistan to a purely military solution, and also seeks to contribute constructively and cooperatively to the wider reconstruction efforts through its own initiatives and in other multilateral forums such as through the OSCE or the SCO Afghanistan Contact Group.

While achieving a level of synergy between these multilateral organizations remains a foreign policy aspiration for Astana, it also seeks as much traction towards its strategic security goal to settle the Afghan problem by maximizing attention on this issue in each forum. In other words, Kazakhstan's national security interests compel levels of cooperation within each organization that might further the longer-term pacification of Afghanistan.

Kazakhstan's role in the NDN has not always attracted the high-profile publicity or international recognition afforded to other states, but this in no way detracts from the reality of that achievement or its potential future growth. NDN as an initiative to mitigate pressures on vulnerable supply lines through Pakistan has served to lessen the risks to such supplies and reduce the loss of lives among ISAF personnel. Astana, like other states assisting in the NDN, has already made an invaluable contribution to this effort, and places part of this cooperation on a legislative footing and may assist in the further acceleration of NDN activity.

Astana's incrementally improving practical defense and security cooperation with the US and NATO assumes many forms, though it can often proceed at a pace that frustrates western policy makers due to their tendency to view the country through a Euro-Atlantic prism. Equally, sensitivity to Kazakhstan's close relations with Russia can be pushed too far, resulting in views and policy approaches which simply fail to take account of the country's development as well as changes in global economic and geopolitical conditions. As Russian experts on Central Asia explained to the author, there are aspects of Kazakhstan's policy planning that remain inaccessible –even to Russians. Ultimately, the extent to which Kazakhstan assists ISAF, participates in initiatives aimed at facilitating the drawdown of forces and longer-term pacification of Afghanistan, or assists in the task of facilitating wider economic integration will remain in Kazakhstani hands. 

## Astana has incrementally built closer ties with NATO

Kazakh soldiers cross the Ili river during the Steppe Eagle joint tactical military exercise

