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# 10

## The Atlantic Alliance in Eurasia: A Different Player?

Alberto Priego

### Introduction

In 1989 NATO initiated a cooperative approach towards the Warsaw Pact. The Atlantic Alliance considered that democracy and the free market had defeated communism, although the Soviet Union stayed afloat. Just two years later the Soviet Union collapsed, and the Alliance declared its supremacy over the whole Soviet space. Russia started a process in which weakness and confusion were the driving forces of its foreign relations. NATO and Russia cooperated in some important issues, although the Alliance was perceived as a threat by Moscow. The Kremlin was too weak to exert a solid influence in Eurasia and NATO could offer whatever Russia could not do. Russia's subsequent strategy was very simple: if Moscow promoted instability in the post-Soviet space, as they did in Georgia (August 2008), NATO would never consider the Eurasian space attractive enough to launch cooperative programmes or to enlarge the organisation. This chapter outlines three periods of NATO–Russia relations:

1. The preliminary phase (1991–2001). NATO began to attract some of the former Soviet military allies such as Poland, Hungary or the Czech Republic, and Russia tried to retain its 'Great Power' status. During this stage, Central Asia and the Caucasus lived a period of instability with ethnic conflicts, terrorism, territorial disputes etc.
2. The phase of the War on Terror (2001–6). NATO's priorities over this period were Central Asia and the Caucasus. The emergence of international terrorism and, overall, the War on Terror created an international consensus in which NATO and Russia cooperated: the fruit of this cooperation was the NATO–Russia Council, created in Rome in 2002.
3. The end of the honeymoon (2006 onwards). The American intervention in Iraq provoked a deep division not only within NATO but also in the Western world. Washington was so involved in Iraq that it relaxed its attention on Central Asia and the Caucasus. Under these circumstances

Russia, taking advantage of its enhanced economic situation, launched a revisionist policy the final chapter of which has been its attack to Georgia.

All three of these stages have been developed under the same logic: the weaker Russia is, the more it agrees to cooperate, but conversely the stronger Russia is, the more it bids for a revisionist approach in its relations with the West. This dynamic is analysed in the chapter following the three stages described above.

### The preliminary phase (1991–2001)

With the collapse of the Soviet Union the world became more unstable and unpredictable. The post-Soviet space suddenly turned into a new reality, which was an opportunity for the Western bloc and a challenge for Russia. While Moscow struggled to maintain its position in this new reality, Washington considered that Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Republics were a huge area in which to spread democracy, human rights, and free markets.

Under these circumstances the American approach towards the post-Soviet countries was perceived by Russia as a threat, although Washington believed it was an opportunity for dialogue and cooperation (Salomon, 1998, p. 4). Even today Moscow considers that NATO's attitude hides a genuine anti-Russian orientation, as most of the principles embodied by the Alliance – good governance or human rights – contradict the autarchic and patrimonial concept of the state in Russia (Blank, 2006, p. 22). For this reason we can affirm that Moscow has its own concept of the world, which has nothing to do with NATO's. When Russia cannot exert its influence or, in other words, when Moscow cannot enforce its model, the option is to promote instability in order to deter other actors from trying to promote their model.

The fall of the Soviet Union and subsequently the collapse of the Soviet bloc created a new international order in which Russia could not effectively respond to the situation and NATO offered solutions to a group of new republics full of problems. Whereas Russia had nothing to offer, NATO was perceived as a promising club that the new states wanted to join. Russia views itself as a pole in the international system comparable to NATO and, thus, seems to assume that former Soviet republics should rally around Russia. When Russia is not strong enough to attract all these republics, the option is to promote instability on their territories using frozen conflicts, the pipeline network built during the Soviet era or asymmetric bilateral agreements as a means of exercising control or destabilising the local situation.

In 1991 NATO started to receive diplomatic missions from the former Warsaw Pact countries. The Alliance members realised that the Soviet enemy had disappeared and decided to create a more institutionalised framework for cooperation with Eastern and Central European countries and, later,

with the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). NATO invited all these former enemies to participate in a new body, the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC). Eastern and Central European countries joined this initiative in December 1991, whereas the CIS members waited until May 1992 (Rivera, 2003, p. 82). Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova delayed their membership until June 1992.

Not only did Russia accept the invitation to participate in this cooperative initiative, but Yeltsin also declared Moscow's willingness to join the Alliance. Between 1991 and 1995 Russia was run by a group of liberals who were really committed to democracy, human rights, and free markets, even if the Russian population did not trust NATO. Thus, although Moscow played the leadership role in the CIS, it did not at that time consider the organisation as a mechanism to exert its influence (Paramonov and Stokov, 2008, p. 8). On the contrary, Russia believed that the CIS could help it to dismantle Soviet structures. Nevertheless, the Russian population thought, and continues to think, that NATO is a military alliance without a clear mission apart from an anti-Russian agenda (Polikanov, 2006, p. 94).

On the other hand, NATO created a new tool to cooperate with the Central and Eastern European countries and with the members of the CIS, the Partnership for Peace (PfP), an instrument that deserves special attention. In January 1994, in Brussels, the Heads of State and Government addressed an invitation to all the states participating in the NACC and members of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), as well. This initiative was mainly aimed at enhancing security and promoting common values in the Euro-Atlantic area. The level of cooperation would be established between the Alliance and an individual partner according to that partner's desires and needs. Both parties would sign an agreement called the Individual Partnership Programme (IPP) where they established their priorities. The relations between NATO and its partners could be considered bilateral because the Alliance tried to pay special and individual attention to each one of the PfP countries. Although the PfP is not a prerequisite to achieve NATO's membership, some of the partners have used the initiative to prepare their candidacy to join the Alliance.

In addition to the IPP, NATO created a wide range of practical mechanisms and activities to promote cooperation with the partner states, including the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), Planning and Review Process (PARP) or the Operation Capabilities Concept (OCC). Concerning NATO–PfP cooperation in Eurasia, the Alliance had to face a different problem related to partners' suspicions about cooperation between NATO and other partners. At times some partners have believed that the Alliance was giving priority to others. For example, Yerevan has expressed its worries about cooperation between Azerbaijan and NATO. Armenia considers that cooperation between NATO and Baku could alter the status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh.

### NATO enlargement

The first serious friction between NATO and Russia arose in 1995, when the Alliance published the 'Study on NATO Enlargement' (NATO, 1995). NATO set out two questions on the future of enlargement: 'why' and 'how'. With regard to the first question, why, the Alliance pointed out that, with the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, Europe needed a unified security framework, without divisions (Whitney, 1995). Most of the Eastern European leaders had declared that NATO was in an excellent position to become the core of the European security order (Asmus, 2002, p. 11).

It is essential to understand that Russia did not share this vision, and for this reason Moscow was disappointed with NATO's drive eastwards. The Kremlin would have preferred a different security architecture in which the Russian Federation played a stronger role. Nevertheless, given its weakness and its limited influence in its former space, the only option Moscow had was to undermine Russia-NATO cooperation. Indeed, NATO's decision to look east hurried a reaction in Russia: the liberal duo formed by Andrei Kozyrev and Yegor Gaidar was relegated to a secondary place in favour of more aggressive politicians like Viktor Chernomyrdin and Yevgeny Primakov. The official explanation was that NATO was taking advantage of its weakness to enlarge the Alliance, bringing about a feeling of humiliation in Russia (Antonenko and Giegerich, 2009, p. 14).

With regard to the second question, 'how', the Alliance referred the candidates to the North Atlantic Treaty's article 10. The candidate should prepare itself to catch up with NATO's standards to become a member. Once admitted, the new member would enjoy all the rights and should assume all their obligations, including the collective defence clause. When NATO pointed out that all the Euro-Atlantic countries could be candidates, NATO opened the door to a 'spread of instability' strategy managed by Russia (Goldgeier, 1999, p. 16). NATO set out that any candidate should settle its ethnic or international disputes before joining the Alliance. Thus, Moscow kept an ace up its sleeve. As long as Russia was not able to offer an alternative security model, it could promote instability in those states interested in joining the alliance.

As a result of these factors – NATO's open door policy and the study on NATO's enlargement – Moscow began to make NATO's life difficult. President Yeltsin, supported by the liberal wing, had accepted PFP as an alternative to NATO enlargement (Salomon, 1998, p. 53). It allowed Russia the opportunity to bid for a privileged and distinguished status in the organisation. Nevertheless, the publication of NATO's study conditioned Russian participation in the PFP, which suddenly became minimal and formal. Moscow moved from the 'Euro-Atlantic' approach in its foreign policy to the 'multipolarity' policy where Moscow became a pole power and attempted to exert its influence on its close circle of allies (Adamia, 1999).

Moreover, Polish officials differentiated between PFP-I and PFP-II. While PFP-I should be just a tool to improve the partners' security situation, PFP-II would mean the first step towards NATO membership (Asmus, 2002, p. 55). Russia was not only relegated to PFP-I, but was also unable to avoid the integration of PFP-II countries into the Alliance. The first round of enlargement was agreed to in 1997 in Madrid (Marquina, 1997, p. 123). Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic were invited to join once they could fulfil the commitments requested by the Alliance. The decision on enlargement was itself made without consulting Moscow and consigned Russia to concentrate its efforts on the near abroad. For these reasons the Allies were forced to compensate Russia by offering a privileged relationship established in the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation. The agreement also created a consultative body called the Permanent Joint Council (PJC). Finally, Russia obtained what it had been seeking since the demise of the Soviet Union, that is, a privileged relation with NATO, in order to preserve its international status (Polikanov, 2006, p. 97).

Nonetheless, in spite of this differentiated relationship, Russia felt itself underestimated by NATO. Thus, the Kremlin adopted a more aggressive strategy in its relations with its near abroad, 'the Primakov Doctrine'. Former members of the Warsaw Pact, or New Independent States (NIS), needed to choose between two security models (Cornell, 2008, p. 128):

1. The Euro-Atlantic one led by NATO and the US where the key point is internal stability, state-building and close and deep cooperation with the European and Atlantic institutions (EU, NATO, World Trade Organisation (WTO), etc.); Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan among others chose this option, although Russia tried to prevent them from doing so.
2. The Russian model, where Moscow tries to maintain its dominance using its military bases, 'controlled' instability and economic coercion to control the area of former Soviet control and influence. Nevertheless, Russia could not solve all the security problems erupting in post-Soviet space, especially in Afghanistan after Kabul fell to the Taliban (Roberts, 2009, p. 30). Armenia, Belarus, and Tajikistan were closer to the Russian model than to the Euro-Atlantic one.

In 1997 NATO went further in its cooperation with Central, Eastern European, and the CIS countries, creating a new body to replace NACC, namely the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC). The main difference between NACC and EAPC could be easily perceived in the acronyms: NATO replaced the word 'Cooperation' for 'Partnership' in an attempt to deepen the relation with its former enemies.

On its own Russia played an important role in areas in conflict. On the one hand, Russia has supported secessionist movements in Abkhazia, South

Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh or Trans-Dniester where the main objective was to spread instability over the region to deter NATO from inviting these countries to join the Alliance. On the other hand, Russia was a prominent foreign actor in the Tajik Civil War (Akiner, 2001, p. 45). Official policy regarding the role of Russia in all these conflicts was neutrality, but Russia has intervened directly in these conflicts by siding with one of the parties. This is an alternative model to NATO, in which Russia promotes a degree of controlled instability and economic coercion to deter Washington and Brussels from asserting their influence in these areas (Connell, 2008, p. 125).

The most controversial issue between NATO and Russia during this phase concerned Kosovo. Russia's strong reaction over Yugoslavia could be explained within the context of decisions of the Washington Summit. In April 1999, just some days before the Kosovo Operation, the North Atlantic Council (NAC) made some important decisions. First, NATO approved a new Strategic Concept that allows NATO to intervene even outside of its traditional area. This element was understood by Russia as a direct threat against its national security. Second, NAC declared that NATO would extend further invitations to willing and able nations to join the alliance. In a way consistent with article 8 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the Washington declaration did not make any distinction between potential members on the basis of their geographical situation—in other words, whether they had belonged or not to the former Soviet Union (Zevelev, 2001, p. 4). Even if everybody had in mind the Baltic States, other republics, like Georgia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan, turned into potential candidates for membership in NATO.

Besides, NATO increased its cooperation with Central Asia and the Caucasus, even though at the end of the 1990s Russia adopted a more aggressive policy towards its near abroad to deter Washington from exerting its influence. Central Asian states were convinced that Russia and the CIS were unable to solve the security problems, that is, Islamic radicalism in Afghanistan or Chechnya, drug trafficking or ethnic conflicts. For this reason Central Asian and Caucasian countries began to seek international help from NATO and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE, formerly CSCE).

Concerning Central Asia, in the spirit of NATO's PFP programme, the Alliance launched an initiative called CENTRASBAT (Central Asia Battalion), which sought to promote cooperation among Central Asian states and NATO. CENTRASBAT consisted of a series of exercises focused on peacekeeping operations developed in a multinational framework. The first exercise was held in 1997 at Fort Bragg (North Carolina) and resulted from a request of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Then, CENTRASBAT spread its reach to Central Asia and incorporated other partners such as Georgia, Azerbaijan and even Russia.

During this first phase NATO tried to establish a differentiated relationship with Russia to compensate for its enlargement. Moscow was con-

sidered to withdraw from Eastern Europe and project its influence towards Eurasia where Russia promoted a controlled instability to deter the Allied governments from deploying an active presence.

#### **Policy during the War on Terror (2001–6)**

The second stage started with the 9/11 events. American emphasis on the War on Terror refocused its approach to Central Asia and the Caucasus. Even though the US formally invoked the NATO collective defence clause, article 5, Washington preferred to base its actions on a 'coalition of the willing' rather than on the Atlantic Alliance (Park, 2005, p. 3). For this reason NATO increased its political and military presence in Eurasia, which the leadership in Moscow perceived as a direct threat to Russia. If during the first phase Russia was displaced from Eastern Europe to Eurasia, now NATO and the US concentrated their actions in Central Asia and the Caucasus to fight against terrorism.

Nevertheless, during this period Russia changed its attitude towards NATO and cooperated with Brussels to achieve its short-term goals. Then, when Russia improved its situation in Central Asia and the Caucasus, Moscow adopted a revisionist foreign policy towards its near abroad that eventually culminated in the Georgia crisis of August 2008. In Central Asia NATO was stuck in Afghanistan and Russia took advantage of this situation and changed the balance of influence in the area. Former Western allies like Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan adopted a new foreign policy closer to that of Moscow and Beijing.

#### **The Prague Summit**

In 2002 NATO celebrated its Head of States and Government Summit in Prague, the capital of a former Warsaw Pact state and a new member of NATO. The North Atlantic Council invited seven Eastern European countries (Slovakia, Slovenia, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, and Romania) to join the Alliance. September 11 had drastically transformed NATO–Russia relations and Russia's view on NATO enlargement. Before the terrorist attack NATO fully concentrated on its eastward enlargement and after that the Alliance centred its focus on Islamic radicalism, proliferation, and terrorism. For its part Russia tolerated this enlargement thanks to the concessions achieved as compensation.

First of all, Russia obtained a privileged status at the 2002 Rome Summit when Brussels and Moscow improved the cooperation framework. The Russian–NATO Council was created, so that Russia could maintain a stronger position than any other partner. Russia got a position that allowed it to play the Trojan horse game, something that the USSR did not get in 1954 when Moscow requested to join the Alliance (Polikanov, 2006, p. 94). Thanks to its opposition to NATO's transformation, the Kremlin achieved an international role that goes beyond its capability.

NATO launched an interesting initiative concerning the PFP programme, the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), to deepen cooperation with the Alliance. IPAP set out some aspects where NATO can advise and assist its partners: these are defence, security, science, and civil emergency planning, among others. With regard to Eurasia, IPAP was really well received among the partners and Georgia (2004), Azerbaijan (2005), Armenia (2005), and Kazakhstan (2006) were the first countries to approve their IPAPs. Whereas Azerbaijan and Georgia expressed their desire to become members of NATO, Armenia and Kazakhstan did not. In other words, whereas Georgia and Azerbaijan are using PFP as a tool to prepare their candidacy to join the alliance, other countries like Kazakhstan or Armenia consider that the programme can help them to reform their defence sectors. This fact shows how flexible and useful both IPAP and PFP are.

After this second round of NATO enlargement the nature of the PFP changed drastically. The remaining PFP members (neutral European, Central Asian, and Caucasian states) had different security concerns compared to those that acquired NATO membership. The unofficial difference between PFP-I and PFP-II almost disappeared and the programme emerged as a tool to help partners to reform their defence sectors. At the same summit Tajikistan, which had not been a member of the PFP, decided to join the programme. With the Tajik integration all the New Independent States had become members of this cooperative initiative, completing NATO's presence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. In 2002 NATO signed an agreement with Kyrgyzstan to use Manas airport for Afghanistan's security operations. Similarly Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan also allowed the US overflight rights for humanitarian purposes. Uzbekistan also agreed to open Khanabad airport for cargo flights to Afghanistan (Buszynski, 2005, p. 547).

#### **The Istanbul Summit**

In June 2004 the NATO Heads of State and Government met in Istanbul, Turkey, which has historical, cultural, and religious ties with Eurasia, hosted what might be called 'the Eurasian Summit' in light of the special importance that was accorded to the Caucasus and Central Asia. The North Atlantic Alliance made three important decisions concerning the post-Soviet space:

1. The Heads of States and Governments stressed the special importance of Central Asia and the Caucasus for the Alliance. Eurasia became part of NATO's agenda and the final communiqué stressed the 'special focus' on the region, which means a clear desire to exert NATO's influence on the area.
2. NATO agreed to improve its institutional presence in Central Asia and the Caucasus with the appointment of two liaison officers at the Almaty headquarters (Weitz, 2006). Their main task is to support implementation of NATO's cooperation with and assistance towards Central Asia and the Caucasus.

3. NATO appointed Robert F. Simmons, Jr. as Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia. Mr Simmons is tasked to inform Eurasian people what NATO can offer to Central Asia and the Caucasus and what the Alliance is doing in the region.

In October 2004, separate from the agreements reached at the Istanbul Summit, the incoming Secretary General, Jaap De Hoop Schaeffer, and recently appointed Robert F. Simmons paid an official visit to Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan) and the Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan). NATO was trying to show how committed it was to the region, but there was a major question to solve. Would Russia allow the Alliance to promote its values in Russia's near abroad? We can point out at least three factors to explain Russia's attitude towards NATO's expansion in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

First, as mentioned above, Russia obtained a privileged role with the creation of the Russian-NATO Council in Rome in 2002. Moscow became a pseudo-member of the Alliance, but without the real commitment associated (Polkanov, 2006, p. 94) with NATO membership. In addition, Russia, a Trojan horse inside NATO, received international licence to eradicate terrorism in Chechnya, even though Moscow used some controversial methods to do so. In other words, Russian cooperation with NATO was not taken for granted and many Western countries substantially reduced their criticisms against Russia's approach to fighting against terrorism in Chechnya.

Secondly, after the Prague Summit NATO stopped its enlargement process despite the fact that Georgia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan had expressed their wish to join the Alliance. None of the countries of Central Asia is especially interested in joining. Most probably, even Kazakhstan, the country that pursues the closest cooperation with NATO, would condition its candidacy to a Russian gesture of agreement (Khidirbekughli, 2003, p. 162). Thus, Russia assumed that NATO's enlargement process had ended in Prague.

Thirdly, Vladimir Putin tried to emulate the Bush Administration's doctrine to legitimise its foreign policy towards the CIS (Blank, 2006, p. 26). Once Russia strengthened its position in Central Asia and the Caucasus, Putin began a revisionist policy in Russian relations with neighbouring states aimed at reducing their ties with the West, which ended up in a war in post-Soviet space, in Georgia. The first step of this revisionist policy was the creation of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), a sort of upgraded Treaty of Tashkent without the membership of Georgia and Azerbaijan (Abad, 2008a).

#### **NATO cooperation with Central Asia and the Caucasus**

NATO's enlargement to the Western Balkans brought the Alliance closer geographically to the Caucasus. Without any doubt the most attractive country for NATO is Georgia. This Caucasian country is on the border between



Europe and Asia, with at least three important regional powers – Turkey, Russia, and Iran – trying to exert their influence in Georgia. The Alliance's decisions – 1997 and 2002 – to enlarge the organisation encouraged Georgia to act, in order to achieve NATO membership.

Although Eduard Shevardnadze had already vowed to lead Georgia towards NATO membership, Mikhail Saakashvili defined Georgia's integration as his first foreign policy priority. Georgia's motivation to join the Alliance is to deter Russia from attacking the Caucasian country. Tbilisi believes that, if the country gains NATO membership, Georgian–Russian relations will automatically normalise. Nevertheless, the 2008 summer confrontation and Russian invasion made it clear that Moscow will not renounce its hegemony in the southern Caucasus.

With regard to Georgia's cooperation with the Alliance, Tbilisi can boast about reaching one of the highest levels of cooperation among the partners. Georgia was the first NATO partner country to sign an IPAP and, in fact, this document inspired two important defence documents: the National Security Strategy and the National Military Strategy. Georgia has been undergoing an important change in the security sector, reforming from a Soviet-style army to a modern one that fulfils NATO's standards.

Apart from that, since 1999 Georgia has developed an active participation in the PFP Planning and Review Process (PARP), modernising its forces to work with NATO. Georgia has hosted some NATO multinational exercises (Cooperative Partner 2001/2002 and Cooperative Archer 2007) and contributed to several NATO peacekeeping and peacemaking missions (Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan) (Priego, 2009a, p. 136). Indeed, Georgia made the largest per capita troop contribution in Iraq. As a reward for its commitment with the Alliance, Georgia was granted an Intensified Dialogue about membership aspirations in September 2006. However, in 2008 Georgia suffered an important setback in its aspirations to join the Alliance. First, the Georgian government hoped to be invited to become a member of NATO at the Bucharest Summit, but the invitation was not offered. Secondly, its candidacy was severely affected by the Russian invasion as it created doubts at NATO Headquarters. Under these circumstances, Georgia has few immediate opportunities of joining the Alliance (Priego, 2008a, p. 53).

Most Western European countries perceive Armenia as Moscow's closest ally in the region. Although Yerevan and Moscow have maintained a strategic relationship, Yerevan is more and more interested in upgrading its ties with NATO and the EU. It is clear that Armenia is willing to cooperate with the Alliance and, thus, in 2006 the Defence Ministry approved the IPAP according to which Yerevan expresses its interest in meeting all NATO standards short of membership. In general, NATO–Armenian cooperation is quite active, and the Armenian army not only participates frequently in NATO military exercises but has also hosted some of them (Tadevosyan, 2006, p. 157). Besides, Armenia decided to dispatch troops to Kosovo to participate

in KFOR mission in 2003. The main caveat for Armenian–NATO cooperation is not Russia, but Turkey. In fact the conflictive relations between Yerevan and Ankara provoked Robert Kocharian's refusal to take part in the NATO Istanbul Summit (June 2004).

US Ambassador Stanley Escudero once described Azerbaijan as a keystone country (Suleymanov, 2006, p. 179). Azerbaijan joined the PFP initiative in 1994 seeking an ally against Armenia and a partner to counterbalance Russia's pressure. Concerning NATO's relations, Baku has been one of the most cooperative partners, not only within the framework of the PFP (Priego, 2008a, p. 56), but also in other matters. It has gone as far as to design and sign its own IPAP in 2004. Azerbaijan accepted 28 Partnership Goals (Masala and Saariluoma, 2006, p. 34), which include the establishment of democratic control of the army, defence planning and budgeting, and the achievement of NATO standards.

As Georgia did in 1999 (Priego, 2007, p. 8), Azerbaijan has expressed its desire to join NATO, thus becoming an aspirant in April 2003 (Cornell et al., 2004, p. 26). Nevertheless, despite the efforts made by President Obama to encourage a rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey, the unsettled Nagorno-Karabakh conflict blocks any Azerbaijani candidacy to join the Alliance. In addition to that, if Russia strongly opposes Georgia's plan to join NATO, the case of Azerbaijan will not be very different. Baku has cooperated steadily with Turkey and the US, taking part in various peacekeeping missions, such as Kosovo and Afghanistan, and also contributing to the fight against terrorism through the Partnership Action Plan on Terrorism (PAP-T).

Central Asia, where nobody wants to be a member of the Alliance, presents a very different scenario from that in the Caucasus. Kazakhstan seems to be the most active PFP member. It has got used to cooperating periodically with the Alliance and usually holds NATO activities such as the annual military exercise. For instance, in 2001, the government of Kazakhstan hosted a multinational military exercise in Qapchaghay. In addition to that the Central Asian country is adapting its army and its border troops to NATO standards. In this sense Kazakhstan is also making important efforts to achieve interoperability with NATO's forces, with KAZBAT and KAZBRIG being two excellent examples.

Another important chance for cooperation is in the scientific area. In this field, Kazakhstan is also participating in NATO's Virtual Silk Highway project, a technological network to provide Internet access to academics living in Central Asia and the Caucasus. In the spring of 2002 the Ministry of Science and Education organised a meeting on financial issues in Almaty (NATO, 2007). The same year Kazakhstan began to participate in the Planning and Review Process (PARP) under the framework of the PFP and has proceeded to an annual review as well. Kazakhstan is trying to share its PARP experience with its Central Asian partners. Astana is also working on the establishment of a PFP Training and Education Centre to provide language

courses and military training for Central Asian officers (NATO, 2007). We should not forget another fundamental issue in Kazakh-NATO cooperation: Afghanistan. Astana has not only expressed its interest in supporting one of ISAF's PRT, but has also sponsored a US \$3 million package for investments, agricultural aid, and infrastructure building. In addition, a NATO information centre has been opened in Almaty with the purpose of improving relations between NATO and Central Asia.

Uzbekistan seems to be the major regional competitor for Kazakhstan. Until the Andijan incidents in 2005 Uzbekistan was one of the most important and active Central Asian partners. Thus, Uzbekistan was the first to reach an IPP agreement and one of the first participants in the PAPP programme. Additionally, Uzbekistan became a key country for ISAF, permitting Germany to use its Termez facilities and allowing the Allied forces to overfly its territory. Also, in April 2003, Uzbekistan hosted the first EAPC exercise ever held in Central Asia – Ferghana, 2003 – a simulation of an earthquake. Unfortunately, the Uzbek Government disagreed with NATO's Secretary-General's call for an independent investigation into the events in Andijan. Thereinafter most of the Uzbek-NATO cooperation was frozen. Currently the Government of Uzbekistan and NATO have resumed their cooperation, and Uzbekistan is recovering its important position in the Alliance's cooperation with Central Asian partners.

Kyrgyzstan is an important partner for the Alliance, not only because it hosted NATO at the Manas air base, over which there was so much political debate in spring 2009 before the Kyrgyz government renewed the lease,<sup>1</sup> but also because of its regional importance. NATO and the Kyrgyz Republic cooperate using the IPP's guidelines approved in the framework of the PFP. In 2007, Kyrgyzstan joined the PAPP to improve its interoperability with the Allies, which, in turn, should enhance the ability of the Central Asian country to take part in NATO peacekeeping operations.

Tajikistan is a very complex country. Owing to the consequence of the civil war, NATO cooperation with Tajikistan remains the least developed with a Central Asian country. Thus, Tajikistan was the last CIS country to join PFP and the pace of developing relations is slower than with any other partner. Nevertheless, Tajikistan is a key actor in NATO's mission in Afghanistan. For this reason Dushanbe and Brussels have signed a transit agreement in support of the NATO-ISAF operations in Afghanistan. Apart from that, Tajikistan is also involved in other cooperative programmes such as NATO's Science for Peace and Security (SPS) and NATO's Public Diplomacy Division, which help Tajikistan to organise a Summer School Academy in Dushanbe every year.

Turkmenistan is probably the most reluctant Central Asian country to cooperate with NATO. Turkmenistan has also been a captive to President Niyazov's policy of false neutrality and isolation. In spite of that, in 1994 Ashgabat signed a PFP agreement, but so far Turkmenistan has not yet approved the IPAP. During the Turkmenbashi period, Turkmenistan hardly

ever cooperated with the Alliance with the exception of counter-narcotics training and some courses at the NATO School (Oberammergau). After the death of Niyazov, the case of Turkmenistan has changed considerably. The new President Berdimukhamedov maintains a more cooperative attitude towards the Alliance. This is exemplified by his attendance at the NATO Summit in Bucharest (Masala and Saariuoma, 2006, p. 34). However, in the meantime, Russia also extended its military presence in Central Asia with the establishment of a military base in Kant (Kyrgyzstan) close to the NATO base. Thus, the existence of two military bases belonging to NATO and CSTO put an important strain on the internal situation of Kyrgyzstan.

It would be Russia that most skilfully would take advantage of this cooperative environment. It did so following a dual strategy: in those cases where Russia enjoyed a strong position Moscow deepened its relations through the signing of defence agreements or the establishment of military bases. On the contrary, in those places where NATO remained in a stronger position or, in other words, where the Russian presence was weaker – Georgia or Uzbekistan – Russia has tried to promote controlled instability to isolate such countries. Thus, Russia tried to apply an aggressive policy to deter NATO from exerting its influence. This is the beginning of a revisionist policy, which we can witness even today.

Over the period from February 2005 to December 2006 three events dramatically changed the situation in Central Asia, shifting from a US–Russia balance of power to an unbalanced situation. NATO and the US have suffered a retreat in their plan to project their influence in Eurasia, and China has appeared as a Russian ally to counterbalance Western influence.

Kyrgyzstan was the first Central Asian country to change its pro-Western foreign policy for a pro-Eastern one. In 2005 the opposition started to accuse President Akayev of corruption in the management of the contracts signed with the US military at Manas. In particular, they targeted Akayev's sons, Bernet and Aidar, who had become wealthy very quickly. On 27 February 2005, protests were unleashed after the parliamentary elections in which the opposition obtained very poor results. Serious riots erupted in southern Kyrgyzstan and reached Bishkek within a few days. President Akayev decided to flee to Moscow after being surrounded at the Presidential Palace and abandoned by its personal guards. Prime Minister Bakiyev assumed the presidency and just a few months later won the general election in July, supporting a very anti-Western policy. In fact, his first post-electoral speech was to announce that Kyrgyzstan should review the presence of American troops in the country (Rashid, 2008, p. 340).

However, as briefly pointed out earlier, the real turning point in NATO cooperation with Central Asian states came about in 2005 with the Andijan issue. Uzbekistan, which could be considered the regional leader, had been the closest NATO ally in Central Asia. Nevertheless, when Washington questioned Tashkent's respect of human rights, President Karimov changed his

foreign policy, adopting an approach oriented more closely to Russia and China (Abad, 2008a). Indeed, before the Andijan events Washington had already asked Tashkent to solve its human rights problems. But, much to the contrary, the Uzbek government issued a law restricting the freedom of the Western media and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in the country.

On 13 May 2005, armed men allegedly burst into the Andijan town jail to liberate 20 or 30 of Akram Yuldashev's followers (Akiner, 2005, p. 17). Suddenly, the demonstrators took control of Andijan and demanded an audience with President Karimov who, without hesitation, sent the Uzbek security forces in response. These forces opened fire against the crowd, provoking an undetermined number of deaths. Two days later, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice condemned the extreme violence (Donovan, 2005). Immediately Tashkent reduced its cooperative links with Washington, suspending night flights, and President Karimov asked the US to recall its troops from Khanabad.

On the other hand, China and Russia supported President Karimov, inviting him to visit both countries. So, under these circumstances Uzbekistan decided to withdraw from the GULAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Moldova) and join the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and CSTO. Indeed, Tashkent has increased its bilateral cooperation with Russia, signing a military pact in November 2005 that allows Russia to establish a military base in Uzbekistan (Radyuhin, 2005).

The third change took place in Turkmenistan when the eccentric and authoritarian President Niyazov died of a heart attack in December 2006. His successor, Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov, has started a new era in Turkmenistan in which Russia seems to have a more important role. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, Turkmenistan is trying to play a balanced game between Russia and NATO, and the new president has increased cooperation with the Alliance.

The second phase in NATO relations with the countries of Central Asia, which had started with a weak and cooperative Russia, ended with a stronger and revisionist Russia that seemed to be even less cooperative than it had been during the first and the second stages. This was just the beginning of a new era of relations between Russia and NATO.

### Phase three: The end of the honeymoon (2006 and beyond)

As mentioned above, taking advantage of the international situation and its enhanced economic situation, Russia launched a revisionist policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus. NATO was struck and deeply divided by issues like Afghanistan and Iraq. The Alliance seems unable to reach a stable consensus over the policy that it should follow in Afghanistan. The US thought it could deal with the situation, although after the US invasion of Iraq most

allies did not want to be involved in another endless war. So, after the Iraqi adventure NATO was paralysed because of the American attitude towards the organisation.

In addition, the high price of energy allowed Russia to be more aggressive and to modernise its army. Moscow realised that by recovering its position in the post-Soviet area it could strengthen its international position. This new pragmatic and flexible Russian approach was more compatible with Central Asian sensibilities than that of the Americans or the Europeans. In this sense, neither Russia nor China criticise human rights abuses, as do the European Union or the US. For this reason Central Asian states are more comfortable dealing with Moscow or Beijing than they are with Brussels, Washington or Paris. Whereas the SCO described Andijan as an antiterrorist operation, the EU and NATO called for an independent investigation to clarify what really happened in that Uzbek town (Alexandroni, 2007, p. 14).

### Afghanistan

In this new phase of NATO–Central Asian relations the main problem is Afghanistan, which has always been a difficult environment for military operations and is widely viewed as a test for the Atlantic Alliance. During the Cold War NATO avoided any involvement in conflicts of this kind, which are out of the Euro-Atlantic area, but the emergence of international terrorism forced the Alliance to play an important role in Afghanistan. When Washington initially rejected NATO's assistance, despite the organisation's invoking article 5, most European allies felt disappointed with the US attitude. In any case NATO had to wait until August 2003 to have direct involvement in Afghanistan, as the Alliance took command of the International Stabilisation Assistance Force (ISAF). The Alliance extended the mission beyond Kabul in a four-phase expansion strategy:

1. ISAF stage 1: In June 2004 ISAF began its deployment in northern Afghanistan and established its headquarters in Mazar-e-Sharif. The pre-dominant troops were French and German.
2. ISAF stage 2: In September 2004 NATO deployed its troops to western Afghanistan including Herat. In addition, the Alliance started to set up the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT).
3. ISAF stage 3: In July 2006, the Alliance assumed command in six southern Afghan provinces, establishing its headquarters in Kandahar. This is the most dangerous area because the region borders the Taliban-controlled areas of Pakistan and is also the birthplace of the Taliban.
4. ISAF stage 4: In October 2006 NATO extended its command to eastern Afghanistan, the last area under US control since the Taliban were ousted in 2001. At this point, NATO took control of the whole territory of Afghanistan and ISAF absorbed Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).



Although the implementation of ISAF stages 3 and 4 sought to bring stability to the southern part of Afghanistan, it deepened NATO divisions. Indeed, in December 2005 the Department of Defence decided to pull out 3,000 troops from the south and the rest of the Allies did not want to make any additional contribution to the mission (Rashid, 2008, p. 352). The geographic areas covered in these two extensions are the most dangerous in Afghanistan because they border Pakistan where the Taliban and al-Qaeda have in effect been able to regroup (Priego, 2008b, p. 95). Most of the Western allies, especially Canada and the Netherlands, were deeply concerned about Afghanistan's potential to become another Iraq. Public opinion in those countries would not permit the escalation of commitment in what threatened to become 'a second war', even if Afghanistan counted on the authorisation of the United Nations Security Council.

The US was strongly criticised because of the Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). When the British army took control of Helmand they realised that between 2002 and 2005 the US army had not monitored the Pakistan-Afghanistan border (Rashid, 2008, p. 358). For this reason NATO allies were reluctant to send troops to dangerous areas such as Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan or Nangarhar, thereby creating a crisis of commitment apparently resolved only with the arrival of the Obama Administration. At the same time NATO's unwillingness to suffer casualties leads to a vicious circle. Once NATO has recaptured territories from the Taliban, it finds serious difficulties in holding those areas (Berdal and Ueko, 2009, p. 56). Insufficient numbers of ground troops require the use of airpower against insurgents, with a resulting increase of civilian casualties and the consequent unpopularity of the Alliance among the Afghans (Smith and Williams, 2008, p. 3).

In the meantime Russia kept on defending its interests in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Thus, the Russian attitude towards Afghanistan can be compared to that of a free rider. Even though the origins of the current problems stem from the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the Kremlin has not helped NATO to resolve the situation. Moscow could contribute to NATO's effort to stabilise Afghanistan by offering lessons learned during the Soviet occupation. But, on the contrary, Russia has taken advantage of the NATO stalemate in Afghanistan to achieve some of its goals in the region. So, the Kremlin offered some incentives to Kyrgyzstan in its failed effort to encourage the latter to expel NATO from the Manas military base. Russia wants to reinforce its presence in Central Asia, or at least to hasten the US withdrawal from the region. Russia would prefer a Central Asia with an important Chinese presence rather than maintaining a competition with NATO and the US. Indeed, the most important Russian task is to create a complicated environment for the Alliance, promoting other alternatives to NATO like the SCO or CSTO. And what about Afghanistan?

NATO's mission in Afghanistan is seen as a crucial test of its capacity to undertake complex missions in distant areas (Rummer and Stent, 2009, p. 100).

This mission is likely to become important for the transformation of NATO. For this reason Russia is not endorsing the Alliance as much as it could, and the Kremlin tries to undermine NATO's international credibility. However, instability could easily spill over to the Russian sphere through Central Asia, provoking serious security problems: for instance, drug-trafficking coming from Afghanistan, which is already happening. About 0.9 per cent of the Russian population was estimated to be abusing opiates (Priego, 2008b, p. 67).

ISAF was initially envisioned as a peacekeeping mission but its mandate included combat against resurgent Taliban in the south. Although ISAF expansion is contributing to enhancing the security situation, it seems that China and Russia have increased fears of encirclement and both states have started to cooperate to change the situation. In 2007, in Dushanbe, the CSTO and the SCO signed an agreement to form a political and military bloc against NATO influence in the region (Abad, 2008a). With this agreement both organisations could hold joint military exercises in the future under the coordination of Russia, which is a member of both organisations.

#### **The Bucharest Summit**

In general Afghanistan may be considered to have been the key issue at the NATO Bucharest Summit, although Kosovo's independence was also included on the agenda of the summit (Blank, 2009, p. 208). All the Allies declared their commitment to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the summit communiqué described Afghanistan as 'our top priority'. In this vein, on 3 April NATO approved a guiding document on Afghanistan entitled 'Strategic Vision' in which the Alliance made four principal points to improve the security situation in Afghanistan. First, the Allies promised a long-term commitment to Afghanistan that would limit the political or constitutional restrictions on the deployment of troops in Afghanistan. Some allies criticised Germany because it deployed an important contingent in a relatively safe area (ISAF 1), whereas it was suggested it send some troops to southern Afghanistan to combat the Taliban. Second, NATO needs to improve the country's governance. Some allied governments believe that good governance is even more important to stabilise Afghanistan than the counter-insurgency. Third, a comprehensive approach to integrating civil and military efforts must be put in place. The best example of civil-military cooperation is the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), which were designed to promote central government authority into the rural areas. And finally, there should be an increased engagement with Afghanistan's neighbours, including Pakistan (Morelli and Belkin, 2009, p. 2). Pakistan is at the core of the problem, as well as a key player to overcome this difficult situation. Both Afghanistan and Pakistan are affected by the same security problems of drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and Islamic radicalism (Priego, 2008b, p. 65), so NATO should apply the same policy to

both countries. The current government of Pakistan is making an effort to fight against these new threats.

Concerning cooperation between NATO and the NIS, NATO appreciated the Russian offer to allow the Alliance to deliver non-lethal goods to Afghanistan through its territory (Weitz, 2008, p. 10). Although NATO has expressed its gratitude to Russia for supporting ISAF, Moscow should be more involved in solving a problem created by the Soviet Union. Indeed, taking into account that Russia is suffering the effects of the narcotics coming from Afghanistan, which has become the main world producer, Moscow should have offered a deeper commitment to stabilising the country. The main problem is that the Kremlin is not prepared to accept any significant NATO-American presence in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Taking into account the difficult situation of Pakistan, Central Asian partners presented themselves as an alternative to the southern supply route. Again, Uzbekistan allows US troops to use the strategic Termez base and its corridor for supplying NATO in Afghanistan (Williams, 2008). This agreement amounts to a kind of reconciliation between Tashkent and Washington after the Andijan clash.

At the Bucharest summit the issue that proved most controversial was the possible NATO enlargement towards Ukraine and Georgia, especially after Kosovo declared its independence. As occurred with the issues of Iraq and Afghanistan, the Alliance was again deeply divided over a new possible enlargement towards Georgia and Ukraine. On the one hand, the UK, the US and most of the Eastern allies favoured the enlargement of NATO. On the other hand, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, and Greece opposed the two candidacies despite their achievements. Behind this division was Russia and its economic and political influence in Europe, as many allies are dependent on its energy supplies.

#### **The Georgian crisis**

As a consequence of this lack of consensus within the Alliance, Russia tried to enhance its international status by attacking the most prospective NATO candidate, Georgia. Moscow considered that NATO had questioned its historical role in the Balkans by accepting Kosovo as an independent state. For this reason, Moscow sought to restore its rights over the post-Soviet space. According to President Medvedev, this area should be a zone of Russian privileged interests (Antonenko and Giegerich, 2009, p. 14). What Medvedev and Putin have tried to do is to make clear to the international community that Russia is back as the dominant regional actor.

Moscow legitimised its action in Georgia on the basis of an earlier precedent, namely Kosovo, where an outside power intervened in spite of questionable international legality, and justified its intervention by saying that it sought to avoid the genocide of the Ossetian people. However, there were three main differences between the Kosovo and South Ossetia cases.

First, the Kosovo campaign was preceded by a period of talks in order to avoid the use of force against Serbia and, in the case of South Ossetia, Russia did not try to settle the conflict by peaceful means. Second, NATO's 1999 intervention destroyed almost all important infrastructure, but in the case of Georgia, Russia not only exerted a higher level of violence against bridges or airports but also against the civilian population (King, 2008, p. 10). Third, the Kosovo operation was undertaken by an international organisation, NATO, whose members are committed to democracy and human rights. It fact, once the aerial campaign was finished NATO cooperated with the international community, including Russia, to promote a democratic government in Kosovo. On the contrary, not only has Russia not made any effort to build democratic institutions, but also the Kremlin has legitimised a corrupt political class in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (King, 2008, p. 8).

The crisis in Georgia has deepened the traditional mistrust between Moscow and NATO. The Alliance suspended all cooperation with Russia, whereas the Kremlin hardened its position on NATO enlargement, the CFE Treaty (Conventional Forces in Europe), and the missile defence system. To cite Oksana Antonenko (2008), the war between Russia and Georgia had no winners. Mikhail Saakashvili damaged Georgia's international image, making a miscalculated decision. In the future Georgia and Ukraine will face serious difficulties in their efforts to join the Alliance because most of the members do not want to sacrifice their relations with Moscow. Russia hoped to find the support of its closest allies but the Kremlin failed to gain any reasonable international support. Only Nicaragua and Cuba have recognised South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states.

With regard to NATO, apart from suspending its cooperation with Russia, it did not take any important decisions and it could likely be perceived as a paper tiger unable to control the Euro-Atlantic area. On the contrary, the EU under the French Presidency played an important role mediating in the ceasefire and contributing with observers to extinguish Georgian-Russian tension (Popescu et al., 2009, p. 2).

#### **Conclusion: The Obama administration – a glimmer of hope**

The Afghanistan problem will remain President Obama's top priority, although it requires a long-term approach. Despite all the difficulties encountered in Afghanistan since the American intervention, candidate Barack Obama promised to increase the US commitment to Afghanistan. The new approach was based on the assumption that the Afghan problem can be addressed neither by a single state nor in isolation. During the spring 2009 NATO summit held in both Strasbourg (France) and Kehl (Germany), President Obama, who has committed 17,000 additional military troops, hailed the strong and unanimous support from their allies and welcomed their promises of 5,000 soldiers to train the Afghan army and provide

protection for the upcoming elections (Priego, 2009b). This agreement is a step forward in the Alliance, since the Bush Administration pressed the allies for more troops to Afghanistan, but obtained a minimal response. Unfortunately, most of the European allies considered that at the beginning of the Afghan campaign Washington and London believed that they could face the challenge without the help of the rest of NATO's allies (Roberts, 2009, p. 50).

In addition, regional cooperation will be crucial to solve this security problem, which is undermining NATO's credibility. Although many neighbours appear to play an important role in the stabilisation of Afghanistan, Pakistan seems to be the crucial country in order to get a definitive settlement. Nevertheless, Pakistan is experiencing a very chaotic situation. Zardari's government hardly controls portions of the country and some areas, like the North Western Frontier Province, are in the hands of the radicals. For this reason, NATO does not want to depend on Pakistan for its supply routes to Afghanistan. The Alliance needs supplementary routes to Afghanistan, and for this reason NATO has agreed to involve other neighbouring countries.

NATO and the US considered Russia a non-significant factor in Afghanistan because it is known that Russia has almost nothing to offer in dealing with this issue, except for the air supply route that goes from Germany to northern Afghanistan across Russia. However, Moscow's attitude towards the Obama Administration is much more positive than the one it maintained towards the Bush Administration. Cooperative political gestures, such as Vice President Joe Biden's holding out his hand to Russia and offering a stronger commitment against drugtrafficking, may help Russia to assume a more important role in Afghanistan.

Likewise, Central Asian countries are expected to play an important role in this new approach, even if Russia does not feel at ease with such cooperation between the Alliance and the Central Asian partners. Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan appear to be alternatives to supplement Pakistan, which alone cannot provide security for NATO supply convoys (Williams, 2008). All these states are in need of foreign investment, which would help them to compensate for the economic recession, and cooperation with NATO and the US would also allow them to counterbalance Russian presence in Central Asia (Blank, 2009).

In conclusion, we could say that since the end of the Cold War NATO and Russia have maintained a difficult relationship. The Atlantic Alliance wants to promote democracy and free markets throughout the former Soviet space, whereas Russia considers that this influence amounts to a real threat against its national interests. Russia is not strong enough to exert its influence in the area it considers its 'near abroad', and for this reason the Kremlin prefers to spread instability over Eurasia rather than allow NATO to control the zone. On its own NATO has not renounced spreading its values throughout the Caucasus and Central Asia by helping

countries such as Georgia or Ukraine to become members of NATO. This clash of interests will put strains on the relations between NATO and Russia in the years ahead.

## Note

1. Both Russia and China put pressure on Bishkek to close the Manas military base (Abad, 2008b) in order to reduce American influence in Central Asia. In the end the Kyrgyz Government decided to renew the lease in return for a much higher rental payment from the US.

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