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CENTRAL ASIAN SECURITY : THE ROLE OF NATO

DRAFT REPORT

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* Until this document has been approved by the Political Committee, it represents only the views of the Rapporteur.

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Following the attacks on 9-11, Central Asian countries feature much more prominently on NATO's security agenda. The US-led intervention in Afghanistan and the subsequent creation of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) led by NATO under the authority of the UN Security Council, brought to an acute awareness of the surrounding region's importance to the security and stability of Afghanistan. Regional security concerns, including terrorism, ethnic conflicts, human- and drug-trafficking, as well as political and economic instability, pose serious risks that impact beyond the region. In addition, 'spill-over' of these security challenges – in particular, drug- and human-trafficking – directly threatens the interests of alliance members themselves as opium grown in Afghan fields and trafficked through porous Central Asian and Caucasus borders eventually finds its way into the streets of Europe and North-America.

2. This report provides a short overview of the security issues in the region as well as NATO's progress in building a security relationship with the five countries of Central Asia. As such, it assesses NATO's achievements thus far. The autumn report will map out some specific recommendation of additional measures NATO might initiate towards its Central Asian partners.

II. BIRDS OF A FEATHER

3. Bordering Russia, China, Iran and Afghanistan the Central Asian countries are strategically important. The region has also become the advanced post in fighting terrorism, religious extremism and drug trafficking. Among others due to their geographic remoteness and because of their relatively small, and declining, populations Central Asian countries are, to varying degrees, weak countries. Mostly feudal Khanates before Russian absorption in the 19th century, the Central Asian countries have only recently begun to develop a firm sense of national identity. The ethnic namesakes of the countries themselves were often nomads divided by narrow tribal loyalties before they were brutally settled by Soviet collectivisation campaigns in the 1930s. The Kazakhs and the Kyrgyz are related to ancient Mongol tribes; the Tajiks are regarded as a Persian people; and the Turkmen and Uzbeks are Turkish in origin. The border demarcations of their respective Soviet Republics did not, however, follow ethnic lines, in some measure because mixed populations made demarcation impossible, in larger measure because the Soviets divided ethnic populations by political boundaries and forced the deportations of potentially troublesome groups.

4. They suffer from a host of challenges, including organized crime, corruption, poverty, civil strife, radicalism and economic and environmental devastation. Small ruling elites have consolidated political and economic power into their own hands. Three of the five Central Asia countries have considerable energy resources. But available energy resources, i.e. oil in Kazakhstan and natural gas in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan can be a boon or a bane for them. Low-income fuels corruption and the wealth earned from exported natural resources tends to consolidate and strengthen the power of ruling elites. Moreover, the ability of the three energy rich states to extract and export oil and gas has been significantly hampered by aging infrastructure, underdevelopment and the cost of transport to markets. They need substantial investments in its energy infrastructure. Relatively weak market economies mean that many people depend on the government for their livelihood, allowing for the maintenance of large patronage networks that in turn aid the concentration of Presidential power and the repression of opposition groups. Economic stagnation (except in Kazakhstan), human rights violations, pervasive corruption and high levels of poverty have contributed to a gradual erosion of the legitimacy of Central Asian governments in the eyes of their citizens. Corruption is widespread in all five Central Asian countries: Out of 159 countries listed in Transparency International's 2005

Corruption Perceptions Index¹, Kazakhstan ranked 107 (score 2.6), while Kyrgyzstan ranked 130 (score 2.3), Uzbekistan 137 (score 2.2), Tajikistan 144 (score 2.1) and Turkmenistan 155 (score 1.8).

5. All five countries inhabit a competitive geo-strategic environment dominated by rivalries between themselves, a resurgent Russia, and a growing and energy-hungry China. The latter has become a key player in the whole region economically and strategically. Securing energy and water resources are of strategic importance to China's economic growth. For example, its oil consumption increased by 33% in 2004. Although its security presence in the region has been reduced, the Russian Federation continues to play a prominent role in Central Asia. Most are dependent on Russia on energy and trade and in particular, Uzbekistan and possibly Tajikistan have made a deliberate choice to make Russia their primary strategic partner in the region. Central Asia's neighbours prefer regimes that are stable and follow their lead, politically and economically. Thus, Western concepts of democracy and human rights are not high on the agenda. While Central Asia's human rights record has somewhat improved, human rights abuses remain widespread, especially in Uzbekistan. There is often a significant difference between the stated aims of the authorities on democratic reform and the human rights agenda.

6. Central Asian countries also face very serious ecological challenges, most of which result from the Soviet legacy: More than 456 nuclear explosions, including atmospheric and underground testing, were conducted between 1947 and 1991 in Kazakhstan, leaving large areas radiologically contaminated. Uzbekistan was an integral part of Soviet biological and chemical weapons programmes. The main testing ground for biological weapons was an island in the Aral Sea in western Uzbekistan, which was severely contaminated with anthrax. Another ecological disaster is the Aral Sea's dramatic decrease of its water level, due to the excessive and irrational use of the water from the Amurdaria and Syrdaria rivers. As a consequence, more than 60 million hectares of land are suffering serious erosion and excessive salinisation. A continuing and growing desertification, contamination of water and a degradation of the whole ecosystem due to the dissemination of contaminating elements by the winds. The whole region and its population suffer a lack of sufficient drinking water and dreadful economic and health consequences.

7. To different degrees, all five Central Asian countries are confronted by Islamist radicalism. Until 2002, armed Islamic groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) found safe haven in Afghanistan. Since the US-led overthrow of the Taliban in late 2001, the IMU has lost much of its cohesion. However, IMU cells and supporters of the ostensibly non-violent Hizb-ut-Tahrir still exist.

8. Because of their economic weakness and because they do not have the strong institutions and civil societies needed to manage the peaceful transfer of power there is a real possibility that one or more of the Central Asian countries can become failed states and a source of regional instability. The riots in Kyrgyzstan in May 2005 are examples of the kinds of instability that could lead to state failure. These events have demonstrated a clear need for social and political reforms, as potential risks for stability are more evident than ever. However, political elites of the five states, with the possible exception of Kyrgyzstan after 2005, generally resist change that does not reinforce their hold on power. In contrast, "coloured revolutions" in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan have led even relatively safe regimes to consolidate their power further. Following is a brief run-down of recent political and economic developments in each of the five Central Asian countries.

¹ The Corruption Perception Index (CPI) relates to perceptions of the degree of corruption as seen by business people and country analysts, and ranges between 10 (highly clean) and 0 (highly corrupt).

III. THE FIVE CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

9. **Kazakhstan** maintains a political environment that is significant freer than those in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, although not as free as the environment in the post-revolution Kyrgyz Republic. The December 2005 presidential election, which gave Nazarbayev 91% of the vote with a reported turnout of over 90%, is seen as a step backwards for the Kazakh political environment. An organised opposition was allowed and opposition candidates were given substantial airtime on public television during the campaign. OSCE election observers reported numerous irregularities with the conduct and count of the vote, although credible exit polls suggest that even without election-day manipulation it is possible that Nazarbayev could have gained a large majority of the vote. There are also speculation signs that Nazarbayev's rule is becoming increasingly authoritarian. In the months following the election, several high-profile opposition leaders have been found shot to death. Recent developments suggest the involvement of secret services close to the government.

10. Along with Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan is considered to have the freest economy of the Central Asian states. The Republic is in the process of achieving economic stability due to the increase in oil revenues, large foreign investments, a high GDP and successful economic reforms and privatizations. Kazakhstan's oil wealth has made it Central Asia's largest economy, and Kazakhstan is the largest oil producer and exporter in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). With an anticipated 2% by 2010 contribution to global supply Kazakhstan's oil is will be among the top ten oil production nations in the world.

11. Since the March 2005 Tulip Revolution, politics in **Kyrgyzstan** have remained unstable. The new government may have difficulties managing the north-south tensions that have plagued the domestic political environment throughout the post-Soviet era. The current governing coalition, led by the ethnically southern President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and the northern Prime Minister Feliks Kulov, has already suffered several high-profile defections. The acting Foreign Affairs Minister, Roza Otunbayeva, could not be confirmed in her post by the Jogorku Kenesh (parliament), and the President dismissed Azimbek Barknazarov, a well-known and long-time thorn in the side of disgraced former President Akayev from his post as prosecutor-general. Both will now stand for the opposition in parliamentary by-elections scheduled for November.

12. The economy slowed significantly in mid-2005. GDP is believed to have grown by only 2.5% in 2005, a startlingly slow pace for a developing economy. GDP is expected to rebound, but only to a modest 4% growth rate in 2006. Corruption and an opaque tax and regulatory environment continue to discourage higher levels of foreign direct investment.

13. In **Tajikistan**, President Imomali Rahmonov has weakened pluralism by imprisoning many of his political opponents and solidifying state control over the media. Opposition parties remain demoralised and fragmented, in part because of Rahmovov's very real popularity as the guarantor of Tajikistan's political stability since the peace accord. Ironically, the President is also gradually dismantling the terms of the peace agreement achieved in 1997 after five years of civil war. Among others, the peace deal guaranteed that 30% of government positions would be occupied by members of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) party. Rahmonov has acted systematically to isolate and neutralise various UTO leaders and sympathisers. There are clear signs that the 2006 presidential elections will be manipulated to favour Rahmonov in his quest for a third term in office.

14. Meanwhile, the Tajik economy continues to grow at a pace that is a bit slow for one of the poorest countries in the CIS. Having expanded at a 10.6% clip in 2004, it is believed that the Tajik economy only grew at a 6% pace in 2005 owing in large measure to a poor cotton harvest and high gas and oil prices. The main industrial export good is aluminium that finds its way to the Netherlands and Turkey. Russian companies are active investors both in the Tajik aluminium industry and in the energy sector, continuing a pattern set in other CIS countries. Owing to the

layout of the Soviet gas and oil pipeline system, Tajikistan must import most of its energy from Uzbekistan. Relations with its large neighbour are prickly, owing to Uzbekistan's pretensions for regional hegemony, the large Uzbek population in Tajikistan. The Uzbeks, for their part, believe that Islamic militants and regime opponents use Tajik territories as staging areas for penetration into their country and in response Uzbekistan mined its borders with Tajikistan.

15. **Turkmenistan's** government is quasi-totalitarian in character with all power concentrated in the person of President Saparmurad Niyazov. Freedom of the press is virtually nonexistent. Little reform has taken place since the Soviet break-up in 1991 and the country's economy continues to be a command model with limited private property rights. The President has maintained power by acting ruthlessly against any real or potential challengers to his rule and through an elaborate system of state-sponsored patronage.

16. There are indications that economic difficulties have generated significant strains on Niyazov's rule. Massive corruption has rendered the governing apparatus increasingly ineffective, although it has, to date, been propped up by the proceeds of natural gas exports to Russia and the Ukraine. However, Turkmenistan's natural gas reserves may be much lower than it claims. Specifically, official government figures estimate the Dlotabad gas field to contain 20 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, but Turkmenistan has so far not released the figures of an international audit that may show much lower levels of gas. To increase its exports, Turkmenistan has showed great interest in the construction of a gas pipeline that would lead through Afghanistan to Pakistan, thus decreasing its dependence upon Russia. The lingering presence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, however, has clouded the future of this pipeline.

17. While there is less political repression in **Uzbekistan** than in Turkmenistan, President Islam Karimov has held his country in an iron grip since winning a flawed vote in 1991. While consolidating his power through a vast system of state-sponsored patronage, the President arranged to have the 1996 presidential election postponed until 2000 and declared his previous nine-year stint to have constituted only one term (since the Constitution, adopted in 1991, sets a two-term limit on presidencies). The 2000 presidential election was then run to give Karimov over 90% of the vote – a vote in which his only declared challenger, Abdulhafiz Jalolov, publicly declared his intention to vote for Karimov. Finally, a 2002 referendum lengthened his presidential term from five to seven years, allowing Karimov to stay in office until at least 2007.

18. Opposition parties have been harassed or intimidated into irrelevance and the five parties that inhabit the bicameral parliament – the Ali Majlis – all support the government. The lack of any legal forum for criticism of Karimov has left only extreme Muslim groups to carry the banner of the opposition. In turn, the regime has used the threat of Islamic terrorism to justify a series of crackdowns against groups or persons considered potential threats. However, terrorism is an issue in Uzbekistan and 15 people died after several car bombs exploded in Tashkent in February 1999. Later that year, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an extremist paramilitary group allied to al-Qaeda, attempted to invade the country through the Kyrgyz Republic though the bulk of the force retreated to Tajikistan from where they were eventually deported. A second incursion by the IMU in August 2000 led to fierce battles between the group and the Uzbek army, which only inflicted a defeat upon the insurrectionists with considerable difficulty.

19. A brutally repressed uprising in the town of Andijan in May 2005 led to a wave of reaction against real and suspected enemies to the regime, including human rights activists and non-governmental organisations. The US- and UN-brokered evacuation of Andizhan refugees from Tajikistan to Europe led President Karimov's to revoke US base rights at the Karshi-Khanabad (K-2) airport in July 2005 following a declaration by the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation demanding a deadline for the withdrawal of US troops from Central Asia. The German Army still maintains a base at Termez as a transit point for Afghan operations.

IV. CENTRAL ASIA AND NATO

20. In comparison to other NATO partner countries Central Asian states differ significantly in a number of areas. First and foremost, the Central Asian countries are not applying for membership in the Alliance. Central Asian republics are interested in co-operation with NATO primarily for military and, to different degrees, also political reasons. Their main motivation is that they want to gain experience, advice and assistance from NATO countries to improve the capabilities of their armed forces. To that end they are eager to build up the military infrastructure necessary to combat terrorism, religious extremism and drug trafficking. As their frontiers are very porous they want to strengthen the control of their borders and improving its security. To them, co-operation with NATO provides a level of assistance that oftentimes involves the direct transfer of material such as border monitoring equipment, patrol boats and the like. Contributions from some NATO Members also enhance security both against outside threats as well as internationally active terrorist groups and against political enemies. The danger is that NATO engagement will become associated with the repressive tendencies of the regimes themselves.

21. Moreover, co-operation with NATO provides an enhanced sense of international legitimacy to the Central Asian countries. This international credibility, brought by NATO cooperation, can be very useful for attracting foreign direct investment – an important goal for all the countries in the region, since most sit on natural resources that they have only part of the expertise and money to fully exploit. Some also consider NATO involvement a certain level of insurance against possible attempts to re-impose a 'hegemonic' Russian influence.

22. Unlike Eastern European countries that, in the aftermath of the Soviet break-up, had national militaries, CIS country militaries were formed out of remnants of the old Soviet Army. In Central Asia, the officer class was predominantly Russian and disappeared in the 1990s with Russian emigration, necessitating that an entirely new generation of mid- to upper-level national officers be recruited and trained. In addition, the old military structure made no distinction between the civilian and the military realm.

23. Central Asia states are largely authoritarian and ruled by former Communist Party officials. The ruling elites tend to see foreign involvement as a threat to their hold on power. Unlike the societies of Eastern Europe, those of Central Asia are not necessarily predisposed toward Western political ideas or values. As stated above, because Central Asian countries do not pursue alliance membership, NATO has less leverage on these countries to encourage military and political reform than in the Western Balkans and the Caucasus.

24. Although NATO's engagement with Central Asian countries is primarily "demand driven" it certainly has larger strategic goals in the region. These involve firstly, achieving, stability and security in Afghanistan; secondly, implementing defence reforms that contribute to broader democratic reform; and, thirdly, boosting a modernisation of Central Asian militaries that could allow interoperability with NATO forces in peacekeeping operations.

25. The most immediate concern involves spillover effects from the still fluid situation in Afghanistan. The lingering presence of Taliban and al-Qaeda forces may inspire underground Islamic radical groups across the region. Another major cause of concern is Afghan opium harvest which finds its first buyers in Central Asian countries. In this context, your rapporteur regrets the recent withdraw of Russian border guard supervisors from Tajikistan. There is some fear that with the formal departure of Russian supervision, the border with Afghanistan may become more open to human- and drug-trafficking from Afghanistan, particularly since most Tajik conscripts come from poor families. The opium that crosses the border into Tajikistan and Uzbekistan eventually finds its way into Europe and increasingly into the US and Canada as

heroin. Drug cultivation and trade has not only severe negative implications for Afghanistan, but it can also increase political instability in neighbouring countries.

V. NATO CO-OPERATION WITH CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES²

26. Recognising Central Asia's increasingly important role for Euro-Atlantic security NATO decided to deepen its engagement with Central Asian (and Caucasus) countries at the 2004 Istanbul Summit. Among others, Allies decided to strengthen PfP programmes, particularly by expanding the PAP-DIB which assists partner countries in the development of more efficient and democratically responsible defence institutions. In addition, Allies created the office of the Secretary General's Special Representative for the Caucasus and for Central Asia. The Summit also mandated the appointment of two NATO Liaison Officers, one for the Caucasus and another for Central Asia.

27. All five Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are PfP members. Their level of participation varies from country to country. For the moment, Uzbekistan is a PfP member only in name. Uzbek co-operation with the alliance has been minimal since the Andijan incident and Uzbekistan's subsequent request that US forces vacate the Karshi-Khanabad (K-2) airbase by the end of 2005. By contrast, Kazakhstan and NATO have recently agreed on an IPAP and the Kazakh government appears willing to engage in intensified alliance cooperation.

28. Of the Central Asian countries, **Kazakhstan** is by far the most advanced in NATO co-operation. Kazakhstan has finished the approval process for the IPAP, although the real difficulties are expected to occur during implementation. The plan includes info on Kazakh strategic objectives and is still classified. The plan will certainly include measures for increasing Kazakh interoperability with NATO forces. The Kazakhs have some experience in this regard, having sent a 29-man strong de-mining unit to Iraq under Polish command. They also have conducted annual military exercises with the United Kingdom on antiterrorist measures.

29. There is even a fully interoperable Kazakh battalion in existence – the 'Kazabat' whose de-mining unit has demonstrated its professionalism in Iraq. 'Kazabat's' high-tech equipment was donated by NATO allies, in particular by the United States. Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian country participating within the 'operational capabilities concept,' a programme designed for Western European countries to promote advanced interoperability with NATO, and specifically US/UK, troop deployments. They have committed significant resources to the programme and there is some belief that they can fulfil its requirements.

30. The **Kyrgyz Republic's** political revolution was followed by an appreciable shift in its attitude towards the alliance. Formerly distant, it now appears interested in further NATO cooperation, already participating in the IPP process. Their performance up to now is poor mainly owing to resource problems. Their officer class is small, their equipment dated. President Bakiyev had called into question the permanence of the Manas airbase, which provides nearly 7% of Kyrgyz GDP, and used by US and NATO forces as a transit point into Afghanistan. A July 2005 joint statement by the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation called for a deadline for US forces to leave Central Asia.

31. **Tajikistan** participates in IPP programmes dedicated to enhancing military interoperability but in a very limited way and they will not be able to participate more until they have a larger pool of officers. While the Tajiks are generally enthusiastic about NATO cooperation, receiving

² PfP=Partnership for Peace; IPP=Individual Partnership Plan; IPAP=Individual Partnership Action Plan; PAP-DIB=Partnership Action Plan on Defence Institution Building; PARP=Planning And Review Process.

approximately \$50 million a year in financial assistance from the US (the largest foreign aid donor), they make clear that their preferred regional security partner is Russia. France is operating a military base in Tajikistan, but its presence has been greatly reduced since the fall 2005 Afghan parliamentary elections.

32. **Turkmenistan** participates only in the IPP process and generally avoids programs devoted to military interoperability. Given its “permanent neutrality” status (recognised by the UN in 1995), Turkmenistan does not offer any asset or infrastructure within the PfP framework. Internal aspects of the regime make it unlikely that the country will further deepen the relationship. For example, a fundamental aspect of NATO defence reform is the separation of the military and civilian spheres and the Turkmeni leadership has, in the past, expressed support for this idea. Functionally, however, the government uses a large conscripted military as a domestic surveillance tool that it is unlikely to willingly dismantle anytime soon.

33. The 9/11 attacks brought the Uzbeks firmly suddenly into the US camp in the ‘war against terror,’ although the CIA and the Uzbek government had cooperated on Afghan surveillance before September 11th. The Uzbeks granted US forces base rights at Karshi-Khanadad (K-2) airport as a transit point into Afghanistan and the eventual allied intervention in the country destroyed much of the IMU’s infrastructure and appears to have killed its military leader, Juma Namangani.

34. The Uzbeks are currently PfP members only in name, providing the barest minimum level of participation since an eviction notice was served on US forces at the K-2 airbase. Furthermore, they have refused the appointment of a NATO Liaison Officer. At most meetings, Uzbek representatives simply fail to arrive. There has been some discussion about making the Uzbek army an all-volunteer professional force, but it does not yet appear that substantive moves have been made in this direction. Like other Central Asian militaries, the Uzbek army suffers from inexperience and corruption among its officer class – a fact that the inept response to the August 2000 IMU incursion made clear.

VI. PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

35. NATO has a strategic interest in Central Asia. Because of their social weakness and because they do not have the strong institutions and civil societies needed to manage the peaceful transfer of power there is a real possibility that one or more of the Central Asian countries can become failed states and a source of regional instability. Moreover, stability, democratization and prosperity of the Central Asian countries would have a positive impact on the stabilization of Afghanistan itself.

36. Despite their different level of involvement, all five Central Asian republics are participating in PfP programmes, primarily in the field of military cooperation. Nonetheless, such a participation in the EAPC/Pfp programmes also implies sharing the basic common values underpinning the Partnership itself. The Istanbul Partnership policy document “Refocusing and Renewal” clearly recalls the normative sources and indicates the expectations regarding the compliance of such shared values. Indeed, all the different EAPC Partnership programmes are value-based, aiming at enhancing internal democratic reforms – including the difficult task of bringing security services and military establishment under effective democratic control - as well as international stability.

37. PfP programmes are proving to be adequately suited to their goals. However, the decision on the level of participation lies within the responsibility of the single countries and often their establishments appear reluctant to engage in programmes – such as the IPAP – which are more challenging in terms of internal reforms.

38. Against this background, the Alliance should continue assisting the countries in the different programmes, albeit by showing Partners the added-value of a closer collaboration. A possible way to improve NATO's PfP programmes towards the Central Asian republics may be to focus more on improving regional co-operation, which is necessary to tackle the most pressing issues, especially economic development and poverty, drug trafficking trans-regional crime, water and border disputes and terrorism. Unfortunately, external efforts to foster regional co-operation in the area have largely been ineffective.

39. The most effective way to enhance stability and advance reforms in Central Asia would be by establishing co-ordination with the EU. Though Central Asia is not covered by the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), the EU's 'Tacis' programme overlaps with many of the political reforms contained within the first chapter of an Individual Partnership Action Plan, provides Central Asian countries with grant-based technical assistance that has totalled over 7 billion euros over the past fifteen years. It is more than a pity that there is no co-ordination between the EU and NATO on jointly implementing proposed reforms in Central Asia: many of the defence-sector reforms that Partnership-for-Peace programmes attempt to establish would ideally be accompanied by economic and political reforms that the EU encourages through its Tacis programme. The two organizations must co-ordinate their activities and your rapporteur is certain that the benefits that would accrue from such a 'synergy' of technical assistance would be considerable.
