

Enhancing, Evolving, Emerging: NATO and Asia's Changing Relationship

By W. Bruce Weinrod

For most of its existence, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization had little, if anything, to do with Asia. But this bedrock of Western security during the Cold War is slowly making its presence felt. W. Bruce Weinrod, US Defense Advisor for the US Mission to NATO, argues it's time for NATO and Asia to consider closer ties.

FOR MOST OF ITS EXISTENCE, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has viewed Asia at best as an afterthought in its policies or actions. Formed in 1949 as an alliance that would permit Western Europe and North America to form a common defensive front, NATO was devoted primarily to protection against the Soviet Union and its allies.

During this period, NATO had a very low-profile relationship with Asia. Indeed, it would have been very difficult to find anyone at NATO who would have suggested that the relationship be noticeably enhanced or formalized.

In recent years, however, NATO has been gradually expanding its international role beyond Europe. In this regard, Asia has become an important dimension of an evolving global network. Indeed, without visible fanfare, NATO and parts of the Asian region have been developing a systematic and growing relationship.¹

These emerging relationships have been driven by several factors: first, NATO's operational imperatives resulting from its intense and sustained involvement in Afghanistan; second, NATO's objective of establishing capabilities that could be useful for future military contingencies; and third, interest in developing a broadened NATO global political-military network. Given the nature of 21st century security threats, an enhanced network of relationships between NATO and various Asian nations appears plausible.

AN EVOLVING SECURITY CLIMATE

The aftermath of World War II left Europe divided between the democratic and market-oriented, or "free," nations of Western Europe and those under Soviet domination in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Concern that the Soviet Union was seeking to control all of Europe led Western Europe and the US to establish NATO as an organization with a permanent political-mil-

itary structure whose main purpose would be to protect its members from Soviet expansionism.

By deterring Soviet expansionism, NATO contributed significantly to the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union. As the Cold War ended, NATO faced three potential courses of action: 1) choose to proclaim that it had accomplished its principal mission, and would therefore dissolve; 2) continue to exist as a shell organization without any meaningful objectives or missions; or 3) take on new roles and responsibilities.

EXPANDING RELATIONSHIPS

After extensive consideration, NATO's member nations chose to maintain a robust alliance of nations with shared values seeking to protect their security but at the same time adapt to a new international environment. As a crucial aspect, NATO decided to engage outside of its traditional borders with the nations of the former Warsaw Pact and the former republics of the Soviet Union. At a minimum, NATO sought to develop formal relationships to encourage internal and regional stability, and, at a maximum, sought to permanently consolidate democratic institutions and practices.

For these purposes, NATO established the Partnership for Peace, which is discussed in more detail below. The PFP, which continues to function and now has 24 members, encapsulates a range of military and political activities between NATO and participating nations.

Separately, another significant evolution of NATO's geographical reach gradually emerged after the former Yugoslavia began to disintegrate in the early 1990s. NATO eventually intervened twice militarily in the Balkans, primarily for humanitarian reasons but also to prevent a widening of the conflict. In addition, NATO established the Mediterranean Dialogue (which includes seven North African and Middle Eastern nations) and the Istanbul

¹ This paper will focus on those areas of Asia where NATO has ongoing relationships. Thus, there will for example be no reference to Southeast Asia. Also, Turkey and certain parts of the Middle East are geographically in Asia but will not be specifically addressed here.

Cooperation Initiative (which includes four Persian Gulf states as members) as forums for political-military discussion and the development of military-related projects.

NATO AND ASIA: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

During the Cold War NATO had no systematic links with Asia. Whatever modest connections that did exist were largely an indirect result of NATO's Cold War security requirements. Simply by virtue of the fact that the Soviet Union was the focus of NATO security concerns, military planning inevitably had to take into account all areas of the Soviet Union, including Central Asia.

Early post-Cold War NATO-Asia interaction was both limited and cautious. For example, NATO decided in 1992 to seek an informal connection with Japan. Thus, as a first step, NATO invited Japan to participate in an annual NATO-sponsored policy conference in Belgium. Tokyo agreed that it would send a participant, but on the condition that the official maintain a very low profile. On these terms, a senior Japanese Foreign Ministry official unobtrusively attended the NATO meeting.

A more significant NATO interaction emerged as a result of the breakup of the Soviet Union as NATO began to establish contacts with the former Soviet republics in Central Asia. The Central Asian nations were early participants in NATO's North Atlantic Cooperation Council (which later became the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council) beginning in 1992. In addition, as early as 1992 NATO organized what was termed the Group of Defense Ministers. This Group was composed of the defense ministers of all 16 NATO Allies and the former Warsaw Pact and former Soviet republics, as well as Russia. The Group, among other things, provided an opportunity for dialogue between NATO and the Central Asian nations.

The question inevitably arose at NATO as to whether a deeper relationship between NATO and the former Warsaw Pact nations and Soviet republics should be developed. For this to happen, NATO had to consider what kind of relationship to establish, and whether to differentiate among the former Soviet allies in terms of the nature or extent of the relationship.


The Partnership for Peace has proven to be a flexible and creative way to bring interested nations closer to NATO. For example, the PFP framework allows for differentiation in terms of the pace and extent of the evolving relationship, as well as with respect to the possibility of NATO membership over time.

On one track, the PFP in effect has become a training program for potential NATO members, with 10 PFP members subsequently becoming members of the alliance. On another track, the PFP has served as a useful umbrella for cooperation without the expectation of future membership. This has been the approach adopted for Central Asian partners. During the mid-1990s, four of the five Central Asian nations joined the program; Tajikistan signed up in 2002.

Actual NATO membership for these Central Asian republics has not been an issue or an objective for several reasons. First, these nations have not expressed an interest in membership; second, there is no political support within NATO for granting them membership; third, they all fall short of the political and military standards necessary for NATO membership; and fourth, NATO's charter specifically limits membership to European nations (this could be changed should the NATO allies so choose).

Matters changed significantly with the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC in September 2001. While the initial military response was organized and implemented unilat-





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erally by the United States, NATO subsequently assumed a growing role in Afghanistan. Today, NATO deploys over 50,000 troops in Afghanistan in the fight against the Taliban and other violent extremists.

Of course, Afghanistan is far away from both Europe and NATO military bases. Thus, for logistical and other reasons, it made sense for NATO to transit Central Asian territory when sending materiel to Afghanistan and also to use facilities in the region for refueling and other purposes. In response to NATO and bilateral requests with respect to Afghanistan, all of the Central Asian nations have provided at least some form of assistance. For example, several Central Asian nations have provided overflight and basing rights. All have participated in a counter-narcotics program launched by the NATO-Russia Council. In addition, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have assisted with reconstruction and development projects in Afghanistan.

NATO AND ASIA: ENHANCING CAPABILITIES

As NATO has taken on a growing number of missions beyond Europe's borders, it has increasingly worked with non-NATO nations. For example, eight non-NATO nations currently have troops deployed in Kosovo and 14 non-NATO nations have military forces in Afghanistan.

NATO has an obvious interest in ensuring that such coalitions work smoothly and effectively, and the Alliance believes that any or all of the Central Asian republics have the potential to support or join future military coalitions should commonly perceived threats arise. In return, effective joint military operations require joint training and exercises, and basic interoperability of equipment.

A key NATO objective with respect to Asia is to enhance national military capabilities of friendly countries so as to ensure that Asian nations choosing to engage with NATO will have military forces that can operate effectively with the military forces of NATO allies. NATO is seeking to accomplish this by developing a broad web of relationships with interested nations.

As a result, NATO has worked with Central Asian nations on non-Afghanistan projects. One area of focus has been interoperability, with the goal of improving the ability of these nations to support NATO-led peacekeeping and crisis management operations. For example, Kazakhstan has created a battalion and a brigade with the help of NATO forces and plans to establish a PFP Training/Education Center. In addition, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have declared a number of units available for possible participation in NATO operations.

Another distinct but important area of cooperation has been disaster preparedness and response, known as Civil Emergency Planning in NATO parlance. Activities in this area included exercises in disaster-response hosted by Uzbekistan in 2003. Finally, there has been collaboration in the fields of science and the environment through the NATO Science for Peace and Security Program. That program led to the

civilian and democratic control of the armed forces in Central Asia.

In addition, NATO has established certain structured elements to enhance its relationship with Central Asia. First, NATO has had a Special Representative to the Caucasus and Central Asia since 2004; second, NATO has a liaison officer for Central Asia who travels regularly in the region; and third, NATO has utilized a meeting



development of a Virtual Silk Highway project to improve access to the Internet in Central Asia through a satellite-based network, and provided grants to Central Asian partners to improve the security of telecommunications facilities.

NATO AND ASIAN REGIONAL SECURITY

Central Asia will likely continue to be a key area of NATO interest. Given that several of these nations directly border Afghanistan, their stability could be relevant to the success of NATO's efforts in Afghanistan. Should anti-Western extremists take power in any of these nations, this could affect not only NATO's re-supply efforts, but also create additional fronts in the Afghanistan conflict. Conversely, the establishment of a regime in Kabul fundamentally hostile to the West might result in support for similar forces in Central Asia.

Given that instability in nearby nations could add another layer of complexity to the existing challenges in Afghanistan, NATO has a strong interest in regional stability. Thus, NATO also has been promoting security sector reform, effective management of defense institutions and

format at the action-officer level that includes all 26 NATO allies plus representatives of the five Central Asian partners and Afghanistan.

Most significantly, NATO has established a military-to-military relationship with Pakistan. Several years ago, a Tripartite Commission including representatives from NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), Afghanistan and Pakistan was established to provide a joint forum on military and security issues. Representatives of the commission meet regularly to discuss security matters in the four main areas of cooperation: intelligence sharing, border security, countering improvised explosive devices and initiatives related to information operations. Recently, NATO has taken the decision to enhance its interaction with Pakistan to ensure that Islamabad is aware of its concerns and interests regarding developments in Pakistan that may impact on NATO's efforts in Afghanistan. This could be a very significant development in the months and years ahead.

India, of course, is also located close to Afghanistan and has its own interests in that nation and the region. Currently, there is no

formal interaction between NATO and India. There has been, however, informal discussion within NATO circles regarding the possibility of establishing formal contacts with India.

NATO GLOBAL RELATIONSHIPS

Over the past few years, several Asian and Pacific nations have established structured relationships with NATO. These include Japan, South Korea,

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Australia and New Zealand. At a deeper level, five Asia-Pacific countries have joined NATO's Tailored Cooperation Program—Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea and Singapore—which implies being a “global partner” with the alliance.

As noted above, NATO's relationship with these nations has increased significantly in large measure due to ongoing work with NATO in Afghanistan. Whether these relationships would have emerged anyway is open to debate, but there is no doubt that concerns about Afghanistan and the security threat it could represent were important motivating factors for the growing connections.

Australia, for example, has approximately 1,000 troops deployed with NATO in Afghanistan. There is an Australian contribution to a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Uruzgan Province, and a Special Operations Task Group deployed under an Australian commander in the same province that operates in direct support of ISAF. New Zealand has provided around 160 troops in Afghanistan.

Japan's relationship with NATO is also primarily focused on Afghanistan, where Tokyo has

supported peace and security-oriented operations. For example, Japan has conducted refueling missions for US forces in Afghanistan and has financially supported a Law and Order Trust Fund to strengthen police activities. Japan has also committed funds in support of basic human needs projects in conjunction with NATO, and Japan may consider providing additional support for allied efforts in Afghanistan.

It is important to note that the relationship of Australia, New Zealand and Japan with NATO extends beyond Afghanistan. Australia and New Zealand, for example, previously provided troops for NATO missions in the Balkans, and NATO and Australia exchange information on countering terrorism. Indeed, Australia views NATO as important enough for its prime minister and foreign minister to participate personally in NATO meetings; and New Zealand's prime minister has also visited NATO. A Japanese foreign minister also has visited NATO, and a NATO-Japan strategic dialogue, which involves biannual, high-level discussions, meets regularly.

South Korea's relationship is still in an embryonic stage. Seoul withdrew its small contingent of troops from Afghanistan in 2007 after a hostage crisis, and it never fully joined ISAF, preferring to provide medical and engineering support to separate US forces in Afghanistan. The door remains open at NATO for an enhanced relationship with South Korea.

Finally, Singapore and NATO recently established an official relationship that was announced at the NATO 2008 Summit in Bucharest. Singapore has deployed a very small contingent in Afghanistan, and its representatives do not regularly attend NATO meetings. However, there exists potential for training and exercises in the future.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

As is clear from the above overview, the NATO-Asia relationship is nascent but evolving. While Afghanistan has clearly been the key impetus, both NATO and various Asian nations have an interest in developing a sustainable long-term connection.



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In this regard, several developments may impact the future relationship. For example, growing awareness of NATO may result in a closer examination of its potential relevance as a model for Asian regional security structures. Obviously, there are significant historical and geographical differences between Europe and Asia, but there are some attributes of NATO that may be relevant.

A related issue is what, if any, connections might be established over time between Asian regional security organizations and NATO. It may be that no compelling reasons will become apparent for

such interaction, but the possibility for linkage should be explored carefully over time.

In addition, energy security is becoming an ever more serious concern in Europe. At the NATO 2008 Summit, NATO decided to assume a role with respect to energy security. Central Asian nations, in varying degrees, possess significant energy resources and also serve as transit points for the trans-shipment of such resources. As such, it would make sense for NATO to work through the PFP program to help these nations protect their energy resources and ensure that these vital resources are secure.

As of now, there is no meaningful interaction between China and NATO. The only significant contact occurred in 1999 at the height of the Kosovo conflict when a NATO aircraft mistakenly bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, which resulted in vehement protests from Beijing. Although relations were eventually smoothed over, the incident undoubtedly made any future interaction between NATO and China more problematic.

At the same time, given China's growing international profile combined with NATO's presence at China's borders with Afghanistan and Central Asia, it would make sense for lines of communication between NATO and China to be opened or enhanced. Indeed, it would not be surprising if Beijing were to take a greater interest in NATO and its activities in the region in the not too distant future.

In recent years at NATO there has been a growing acceptance of the proposition that the most important security threats are no longer geographically defined. As a result, NATO has developed a global network and many cooperative political or military programs and projects are underway to assess, prepare for or address current or potential threats to NATO's security from anywhere in the world.

NATO has become, among other things, a global security forum. At NATO, or under NATO sponsorship, nations from various regions, including Asia, convene to discuss security threats and challenges at regional meetings and also at major NATO gatherings, and ministerial meetings. NATO has also become a global security coordinator. Asian nations, among others, are working with NATO to develop military capabilities that can be deployed collectively should the political decision be made to do so.

It appears very likely, given NATO's global interests, that NATO and Asian nations will de-

velop increasingly close relations. Therefore, NATO needs to focus even more on understanding this complex region. At the same time, Asian nations also should take every opportunity to gain an enhanced understanding of NATO. Asian policymakers and policy organizations should visit NATO and initiate NATO-Asia meetings and conferences.

In this way, over time, NATO and Asia can establish two separate but related relationships. On one track, NATO and interested Asian nations can develop increased security cooperation and prepare not only for military operations when necessary, but also for civil-military missions that address the challenges of failed states and failed territories within nations.

On a second track, interested nations that share broadly the political values of NATO can join in a network of democracies that may be able to work together for common purposes. Given the fact that NATO already serves as a global security forum, one can envision NATO becoming the framework for a global democratic security community. Already, five Asian democracies participate with like-minded nations in NATO forums and discussions. Shaping this into a more formal structure is worth serious consideration. In any event, it can be said that the NATO-Asia relationship will be a growing factor in international politics in the years ahead.

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