On the front line

As NATO’s Central Asian Partners take up frontline positions in the international coalition against terrorism, Osman Yavuzalp examines the Alliance’s relations with these countries.

When it became clear that the 11 September terrorist attacks on the United States had been masterminded by Osama Bin Laden’s Afghanistan-based al-Qaida network, their ferocity and audacity came as little surprise to the countries of Central Asia. The international community had, of course, been aware of the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and expressed concern about human rights’ violations, the wanton destruction of Buddhist statues and the arrests of international aid workers for allegedly preaching Christianity. But the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and, to a lesser extent, Kazakhstan had experienced first-hand the dangers posed by Afghanistan’s Taliban regime, having long suffered consequences of the drugs trade and been victim, since 1998, of several incursions by terrorists linked to al-Qaida.

Indeed, the countries of Central Asia had been among the first to draw the world’s attention to the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and the potential risks to international security. As early as 8 September 2000 — a year before the attacks on the United States — Uzbek President Islam Karimov warned the UN General Assembly that: “Afghanistan has turned into a training ground and a hotbed of international terrorism” and that: “The continuing war in Afghanistan stands as a threat to the security of not only the states of the Central Asian region, but to the whole world.”

Mindful of the need to restore law and order and to end the suffering of the Afghan people, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have, since 1997, tried to work for a peaceful solution to the Afghan crisis through the so-called “six plus two group” of countries which includes China, Iran and Pakistan, and is supported by both Russia and the United States. More recently, this group met Ambassador Lakdar Brahimi, UN special envoy to the region, in New York on 12 November, on the fringes of the UN General Assembly, for talks about a post-Taliban Afghanistan at which the representatives of the six neighbouring countries expressed support for the formation of a broad-based, multi-ethnic and freely chosen post-Taliban government.

In the immediate aftermath of 11 September, the countries of Central Asia joined fellow members of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) in unconditionally condemning the attacks and pledging to undertake all efforts to combat the scourge of terrorism. Since then, they have made good their pledge by making territory and assets available to the international coalition. Kazakhstan announced its readiness to support the US-led coalition with all the means at its disposal on 24 September. Similarly, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have made their support for the fight against terrorism clear. And Uzbekistan has become a vital element in the campaign against the Taliban, announcing on 5 October that it would open its air space to US planes and grant landing rights on Uzbek territory for search-and-rescue and humanitarian missions. Given that all these countries have predominantly Muslim populations, their support demonstrates that, contrary to Bin Laden’s claims, the international campaign against terror is neither a crusade against Islam nor a clash of civilisations.

The 11 September attacks have demonstrated the indivisibility of security in the Euro-Atlantic area. All countries now face the same threats, whether they be in North America, Europe or Central Asia. Moreover, the attacks and the ensuing campaign against terrorism have also brought into focus the importance of Central Asia to Euro-Atlantic security and the need for closer cooperation between NATO and its Central Asian Partners — not just within the context of the current crisis, but beyond.

Central Asia and Europe have a long history of close interaction. During the 19th century, the region attracted the attention of both British and Russian empires because the Great Silk Road, the major trade route linking Europe to the Far East, passed through it. Today, Central Asia’s energy reserves hold out the possibility of great wealth for the development of the region. However, NATO’s interest in the region during the past decade is neither the result of Central Asia’s history nor its economic potential. Instead, the Alliance has wished to foster security in Central Asia as part of its strategy of building partnerships with emerging democracies, meeting new security challenges and promoting stability throughout the Euro-Atlantic area. Efforts to pursue closer partnership and cooperation through both the Partnership for Peace programme and the EAPC have been of benefit to all.

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