

NATO'S ROLE IN SOUTH CAUCASUS REGIONAL SECURITY

This article begins with an analysis of the security deficit in the South Caucasus and how instability in this region could threaten the interests of NATO. The author argues that NATO's increased engagement in this region is needed. To this end, the author provides recommendations both for NATO and the South Caucasus. The author advocates a focused and strategic approach to the South Caucasus on the part of NATO, with European powers being more responsive to the threats and opportunities emanating from the South Caucasus. He is skeptical about allowing Russian opposition to be an obstacle to NATO's efforts and notes that in the long term NATO success in this region is in Russia's interests as well. Pointing out the political and military improvements Partnership for Peace (PfP) has fostered, the author underlines the importance of keeping these countries anchored to the Euro-Atlantic system.

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The enlargement of NATO in Spring 2004, and the new geopolitical reality of Alliance members' security interests, is prompting NATO to refocus its energies southward and eastward. As most countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where much of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) activities were concentrated, have become NATO members, PfP's geographic focus is clearly shifting.

PfP's success in fostering military reform and cooperation has exceeded all expectations, which has meant that it is seen as an instrument with great potential to accomplish similar success in other areas, where PfP has either been involved with lesser intensity or not at all. This also means that more assets are now available for programs in the western Balkans, South Caucasus, and Central Asia. Of these, the South Caucasus stands out as being the region with the most acute security deficit. The three new, and unfortunately, weak states of the region all have serious and unresolved territorial problems that have provided excuses for outside interference. All have sought refuge in external security arrangements, Azerbaijan and Georgia with bilateral links to the U.S. and Turkey and increasingly NATO's Partnership for Peace, and Armenia through limited contact with NATO/PfP but also with an extensive security treaty with Russia. Russia also maintains three bases in Georgia, a large base in Armenia, and has provided Armenia with a billion dollars worth of modern armaments.¹ Other security threats in the region can be summarized as transnational crime, political violence and external intervention. Meanwhile, the enlargement of the Euro-Atlantic institutions into Eastern Europe and the security interests of western states in Central Asia, Afghanistan and the Wider Middle East have made the South Caucasus a strategically important region. Security in the South Caucasus is an increasingly important concern for the west, yet no institutional structures exist in this region that have the potential to foster security, resolve conflicts, and counter transnational threats. Among existing states and international organizations, NATO is the best-placed and only feasible option that can build security in the South Caucasus.

The Security Deficit

The South Caucasus region was plagued by conflict and instability long before the area achieved independence. The ethno-political conflicts in the region that raged in the early 1990s led to the death of over 50,000 people, great material destruction, and contributed significantly to the political instability, economic hardships, and the increase in

¹ Washington Times, 10 April 1997; Richard F. Staar, "Russia's Military: Corruption in the Higher Ranks," *Perspective*, Vol. 9, No.2 (November-December 1998).

transnational organized crime that has characterized the region in its first decade of independence. The conflicts came on the heels of the weakening and subsequent break-up of the Soviet Union. These conflicts centered on the territorial status of three regions populated by ethnic minorities: the mainly Armenian-populated Mountainous Karabakh Autonomous Province of Azerbaijan; the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, and the South Ossetian Autonomous Province, both in Georgia. At present, none of the conflicts in the South Caucasus has found a negotiated solution, and the conflicts are often referred to as “frozen” along unsteady cease-fire lines. More correctly, the processes to resolve these conflicts are frozen. A relapse to warfare is a distinct possibility in all three-conflict areas, as negotiations have yielded no positive results. Besides these active conflicts, other minority regions in the three states have seen tensions between the central government and representatives of ethnic minority populations, demanding higher levels of autonomy. Areas with conflict potential include, significantly, Georgia’s mainly Armenian-populated Javakheti region, whose links with the rest of Georgia have weakened continuously since independence. The Spring 2004 standoff between the Georgian Central Government and the leadership of the Ajarian Autonomous Republic was resolved peacefully, nevertheless the military build-up that briefly took place illustrated the conflict potential in the region outside the overtly secessionist territories. Perhaps most worrisome is the deadlock in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, with frustration increasing primarily in Azerbaijan with the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven formerly predominantly Azerbaijani-populated provinces. The mood of both the Azerbaijani elite and public are both becoming increasingly belligerent, and as a consequence the risk of a resumption of warfare is gradually increasing.

In addition to ethnic tensions, which have been the region’s main type of conflict, all three countries have been afflicted by the use of violent means to alter the leadership of the respective states. This has included armed insurgencies that managed to overthrow existing governments in Georgia in 1991, in Azerbaijan in 1993, as well as several unsuccessful attempts made to alter the political environment since then. Assassination attempts have also been made against leaders, including two failed attempts on the life of Georgia’s President and the assassination of Armenia’s Prime Minister and Speaker of Parliament in 1999. In a positive development, Georgia’s regime change in 2003 took place in a peaceful, non-violent manner; but it underscored the fact that no transfer of power in these three countries has taken place in an entirely peaceful and constitutional manner. To compound this unruly picture, the South Caucasus has in the last few years been increasingly affected by other security threats of a more transnational nature,

including organized crime, specifically trafficking of narcotics, arms, WMD materials, and persons, and the rise, though slow, of Islamic radical movements.²

While these are all predominantly internal security threats, the international environment surrounding the region compounds the regional problems, primarily through foreign involvement in the ethno-political conflicts. The South Caucasus has gained importance due to its strategic location and its energy resources. The region's strategic location between Russia and Iran, connecting Europe and Asia, as well as its oil and gas resources and the fact that it serves as the chief route for the westward export of Caspian energy resources, has gradually led to an increased amount of geopolitical attention. It is especially the events of September 11 that brought the South Caucasus out of the backwaters of international politics and gave it a place of prominence. With a U.S. and allied military presence in Central Asia, Afghanistan and the Middle East, the South Caucasus is a crucial area connecting NATO territory and military operations in Afghanistan and staging areas in Central Asia. Yet, as Alexander Rondeli has pointed out, the important geopolitical location of the South Caucasus has been as much, if not more, of a liability as it has an asset to the regional states.³ International interest in the region has tended to increase the polarization of regional politics, entrench existing conflicts, and thereby make the region's road to stability more complicated. Having dramatically differing and existential threat perceptions, the three South Caucasian states have developed diverging strategies to ensure their security: Armenia, perceiving threats from Turkey and Azerbaijan, has sought security through ties with Russia; Azerbaijan, perceiving threats from Iran, Armenia, and to a decreasing extent from Russia, has sought western and Turkish support; while Georgia, mainly perceiving threats from Russia and internal challenges with links to Russia, mainly seeks American protection. The alignments emerging out of these differing threat perceptions are contradictory and potentially devastating to regional security.

In this sense there is an acute security deficit in the South Caucasus. In spite of the manifold security challenges to the region, there are no functioning security mechanisms or institutions that help build regional stability or meaningful conflict management or

2 Svante Cornell, "The Growing Role of Transnational Crime in the South Caucasus," in Dov Lynch (ed.), *The South Caucasus: A Challenge for the EU*, (Paris: EU Institute of Security Studies, Chaillot Papers, 2003); Tamara Makarenko, "Smuggling Operations Degrade Security in the Caucasus," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, November 2003; Anna Matveeva and Duncan Hiscock, *The Caucasus: Armed and Divided*, (London: SaferWorld, April 2003); Douglas Frantz, "Nuclear Booty: More Smugglers Use Asia Route," *The New York Times*, 11 September 2001, p. A1.

3 Alexander Rondeli, *Foreign Policy of Georgia and Priorities of National Security*, Tbilisi: UNDP Discussion Paper Series, No.3, 1999.

resolution. International efforts at conflict resolution, sponsored mainly by the OSCE and the UN, have so far brought little results.⁴ International security assistance to the regional states have had limited results, while their integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions has progressed slowly. Meanwhile, the increasing strategic value of the region and the actual and potential exacerbation over time of security threats there imply a potential cost of inaction on the part of the international community that could be prohibitive, especially for western powers with increasingly vital interests in the stability, openness and development of the region.

The Need for Security

The security deficit stemming from the interrelated and unregulated security threats described above have plagued the region for a considerable time. The increasing importance of the South Caucasus in the aftermath of the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq have now made the security deficit a threat not only to regional security but to that of Euro-Atlantic interests as well. The need for institutionalized security arrangements to manage, reduce and if possible resolve the security threats in the region has become palpable. In fact, it is increasingly apparent that failure to provide security is impeding the building of viable sovereignty in the region.

The insecurity of the South Caucasus impedes political stability, accountability and democratic development in several ways. Most prominently, insecurity in the early-to-mid 1990s derailed the political liberalization processes ongoing in the region and legitimized the return of authoritarian rule in all three states. The popular desire for order and stability, therefore, allowed the governing structures to backpedal on institutional reform of both a political and economic nature. Political instability followed as a direct consequence of the conflicts, as government performance led to the rapid loss of popular legitimacy and encouraged armed political contenders to challenge authorities. Moreover, corruption and criminal infiltration of government bodies at a national and regional level were facilitated by the weakening of government that resulted from the conflicts.

⁴ Istvan Szönyi, "The False Promise of an Institution: Can Cooperation between OSCE and NATO be a Cure?", Center for International Security and Arms Control, January 1997. John J. Maresca, "Resolving the Conflict Over Nagorno-Karabakh: Lost Opportunities for International Conflict Resolution", in Pamela Aall, Chester A. Crocker, and Fen Osler Hampson (eds.), *Managing Global Chaos: Sources of and Responses to International Conflict*, (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996); Rexane Dehdashti, *Gewaltminderung und Konfliktregelung in ethnosozialen Konflikten. Möglichkeiten und Grenzen internationaler Akteure in der Kaukasusregion*, unpublished dissertation, Frankfurt am Main 1997. Rexane Dehdashti, *Internationale Organisationen als Vermittler in Innerstaatlichen Konflikten: Die OSZE und der Berg Karabach-Konflikt*, (Frankfurt: Studien der Hessischen Stiftung Friedens und Konfliktforschung, 2000).

In an economic sense, the conflicts and the insecurity they bred severed regional trade linkages. Moreover, fighting brought material destruction, and created an economic burden as well as a decrease in economic production due to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people who became refugees in their own countries. Reduced economic production exacerbated problems with corruption and organized crime, since the collapse of the labor market made corruption and crime not only attractive alternative sources of income, but for some people the only possible source of income. Moreover, the loss of legitimate trade was replaced by illicit trade, which has been partially concentrated in separatist areas or territories, which for all practical purposes, lay outside government control at various times in the last decade, such as the Ajaria, Javakheti, and Lezgin-populated areas of Azerbaijan.

On a societal level, the refugee populations are still not integrated with the general population, with specific problems and both material and psychological suffering that impact society as a whole, especially in Azerbaijan and Georgia. In addition, the unresolved conflicts are helping to fan the flames of nationalism in the region, thereby impeding the development of civic-based identities and democratic politics more generally.

Western aid to the region and to other conflict-ridden areas have often attempted to go around the hard security issues and approach the multi-faceted problems of the region from the other side, trying to work at the grassroots level by encouraging economic exchanges, supporting civil society, and in general building confidence in hopes that these efforts would help bring about a more positive climate that would in turn lead to improvements in conflict resolution and regional security. The record so far shows the pitfalls of this process. While western assistance has undoubtedly been immensely beneficial to political and economic development in the region, it has failed to yield positive results with relation to the security problems of the region. It is becoming increasingly apparent that insecurity lies at the base of the problems of the South Caucasus, and that only by directly addressing the security deficit in the region will it be possible for the South Caucasus to develop economically and politically into stable and peaceful societies that will be net security providers rather than net security recipients.

Inadequate Security Mechanisms and NATO's Role

The number of interested parties in the South Caucasus is already significant. Russia, the U.S., Turkey, Iran, the CIS, and the OSCE are the some of the states and organizations that have interests in the region and a stated agenda to promote security and stability, as they define it, in the region. After a decade of independence, it has nevertheless become clear that no single power –or a combination of two powers– has sufficient influence to

act as an arbiter of the security of the South Caucasus. Russia has continually had this ambition; and has concluded an implicit alliance with Iran for that purpose. Yet the states of the South Caucasus, especially Azerbaijan and Georgia, have eschewed Moscow's attempts to re-impose its dominance over the region and have sought security through relations with Turkey and the United States. However, while Turkey and the U.S. seek to boost security in the region, dominating the South Caucasus is not their agenda, however much Iranian and Russian players may suspect this. As a result, there are two models of integration for the South Caucasus: one that envisages the region's eventual integration into Euro-Atlantic security and economic systems, linked with internal evolution toward the building of strong state institutions and the rule of law. Another, led by Russia, attempts to regain dominance over the region via military bases, controlled instability, and economic coercion through the take-over of state industries in debt-for-asset swaps.

The UN and the OSCE, while potentially having a role in security, were useful in ending the overt warfare in the region and the setting up of cease-fire regimes. However, they have failed to move toward resolution of these conflicts. The UN's engagement in the region is limited in the security sphere. The OSCE, on the other hand, has a more important agenda in the South Caucasus, but it has largely failed to meaningfully contribute to security in the region, and its role as mediator mainly serves to contain the conflicts over Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia. It should be noted that the OSCE has proven useful in monitoring the Chechen sector of the Russian-Georgian border and contributed to lowering tensions there; but the OSCE's potential to contribute to a significant improvement of the security situation in the region is limited.

In this context, NATO and its wide array of programs in the region, most of which are organized under the auspices of Partnership for Peace, appears to be the most promising organization as a vehicle for change. This is proven by its track record in Central and Eastern Europe, not the least of which is its programs to bring new accession countries up to European standards in both military and political terms, and through its role as security provider in the Western Balkans. Moreover, NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) is the only multilateral security mechanism that actively involves all three states of the South Caucasus.

The second enlargement of NATO into Eastern Europe in 2004 brought NATO into the territory of the former Soviet Union, through the accession of the three Baltic states. Moreover, by extending into Bulgaria and Romania, NATO moved into the Black Sea area even more forcefully, even though it has had a historic presence in the area via Turkey for a long time. This brought NATO even closer to the South Caucasus. Enlargement also meant the inclusion of states with significantly closer relations to the

South Caucasus and Central Asia, and with much more vital interest in the security of these regions. NATO's emphasis, however, is clearly shifting to focusing on bolstering cooperation with the countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia. This renewed focus, ushered in by NATO's Istanbul summit of June 2004, stems largely from the security realities of NATO and its member states, and the new character of security threats that leading NATO states perceive.

NATO in the South Caucasus: Why Engage?

NATO's increasing engagement is a direct result of the Alliance responding to the ever-growing security interests in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Wider Middle East. NATO member states are now deeply committed militarily in both Afghanistan and Iraq, generating a much greater interest in the Wider Middle East. They are also operating military bases in Central Asia, which are crucial to the campaign in Afghanistan. As an organization, NATO is in charge of the Peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan. Even though Balkan operations in the mid-to-late 1990s were NATO's first out-of-area operations, Afghanistan stands out in terms of its distance from NATO member countries. As Stephen Blank has noted, "NATO is undergoing a profound transformation into an organization whose main missions are collective security and crisis management and whose main center of activity is increasingly located in the Muslim world."⁵ As such, plans exist to extend PfP to several countries in North Africa and even possibly Qatar.

On a strategic level, the increasing NATO focus on the Caucasus and Central Asia stems from the fact that the national security interests of NATO and its member states in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, especially those related to the war on terrorism, NATO's obligations in Central Asia and Afghanistan, and the role of the Alliance in the Wider Middle East, have grown to such a degree that instability and unrest in the South Caucasus would have a huge negative impact on its interests in the area. The individual and collective interests of NATO members, therefore, suggest that a larger role for the Alliance in strengthening the security of the South Caucasus is warranted, and this realization is gradually being turned into practice. Among NATO members, the United States defense planning community was the first to identify how the South Caucasus fits into Euro-Atlantic security interests: first, the South Caucasus forms an integral part of the arc of instability stretching from North Africa to Southeast Asia, which the U.S. has identified as the most likely source of threats against U.S. and western security interests in the foreseeable future. Yet the region, in spite of its fragile stability, constitutes a basis which can be used to work in the regional countries, who are led by friendly

⁵ Stephen Blank, "NATO's Drive to the East," *The National Interest*, 11 February 2004.

governments. On a practical level, the South Caucasus and Central Asia actually function as springboards for U.S. and coalition military operations, and may continue to do so in future contingencies. The South Caucasus and Central Asia were both crucial to the allied military campaign in Afghanistan. Central Asian states, especially Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and to a lesser extent Tajikistan provided bases for the military campaign, which was crucial to the successful overthrow of the Taliban regime. The South Caucasus, and especially Azerbaijan and Georgia, were a logistical corridor crucial for coalition aircraft access to operational theaters further East.

The importance of the South Caucasus was also further boosted by the operation in Iraq. While attention to the region on a political level may have suffered in both Europe and the U.S., Azerbaijan's and Georgia's support for Operation Iraqi Freedom were important to the U.S. due to their proximity to the Middle East, especially in view of U.S. disagreements with Turkey. Furthermore, given U.S. tensions with Iran, the strategic importance of Azerbaijan, the only country bordering both Iran and Russia, coupled with its symbolic value as a moderate, secular and pro-western Shi'ite Muslim majority state, is becoming increasingly clear. It is, moreover, one of the parts of the Islamic world where anti-Americanism arguably finds the least following.

In summary, immediate concerns, such as the peacekeeping operation in Afghanistan, as well as deeper strategic considerations of NATO member states, are making Central Asia and the South Caucasus increasingly important areas of concern for NATO. What forms could a NATO engagement in the South Caucasus take? Both Azerbaijan and Georgia, the latter more forcefully, have declared an ambition to obtain membership in the Alliance. This is unlikely to happen under any circumstance for many years. While this is obvious to most observers, NATO may be the *sine qua non* for security in the South Caucasus. The most promising and perhaps single means of redressing the "security deficit" in the South Caucasus is through the gradual extension of the widest possible range of NATO programs into the area. Local states have tended to view NATO as a question of membership, of "To Be or Not To Be?". Regional states, including Armenia, are now gradually realizing that relations with NATO are in fact concerned for their part on how to select, develop, and compound NATO programs that will, together and increasingly over time, transform the regional security picture overall, by which time the region will also have evolved to a point at, or near, the doorstep of both NATO and the EU. In fact, it is pointless to talk of NATO membership at present, given that NATO itself is an organization which in 7-10 years – a point where the membership of the regional states could become realistic – will most likely be very different than it is today. As such, membership today and in 10 years are probably incomparable.

Challenges to NATO's Role

The two main challenges to NATO's success in Central Asia and the South Caucasus are its relations with Russia, and the internal debates among member states. Russia's knee-jerk reaction to increasing NATO activities in its self-proclaimed 'Near Abroad' are zero-sum; to most Russian actors, NATO activities of any type are contrary to Russian interests. This is clearly the case as Russian perceptions of NATO activities in Central Asia and the South Caucasus are concerned. NATO's mission in this context is to drive home the point that its activities are not directed against anyone. Furthermore, by increasing regional security in these regions, NATO's programs actually increase rather than decrease Russia's security. With the dominance of power ministries over Russian foreign and security policy-making, this point is unlikely to be accepted easily in Moscow. Nevertheless, Moscow's opposition must not be taken as an obstacle to NATO's efforts to increase regional security.

Secondly, NATO member countries clearly have differing views of the Alliance's role, especially when it comes to out-of-area ventures. The U.S. is clearly much more positive toward NATO expansion into the South Caucasus than are most European powers. Whether European states will gradually see the need for greater engagement in the South Caucasus is unclear; nevertheless, it is likely that the U.S. lead is going to be followed by a number of NATO members, most obviously its new member states. Internal debates over NATO's role may for some time mitigate the Alliance's effectiveness in these regions. The state of transatlantic relations, more than anything else, will determine the effectiveness of NATO, including in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Nevertheless, it is important to note that NATO interests in the South Caucasus are not exclusively or even primarily synonymous to American interests. In fact, Europe has an even wider range of interests and challenges in the South Caucasus and these are beginning to generate greater engagement. Europe's lack of a coherent foreign and security policy is delaying the formulation and implementation of a European policy in the South Caucasus; however, this is not likely to continue for long. The challenges and potential threats to Europe emanating from the South Caucasus as well as the opportunities it finds there is likely to gradually raise the level of European interests, including security interests, in the region, and it is NATO that will provide the most useful framework, in possible cooperation with the European Union.

Looking Forward: How to Engage?

The crucial point in formulating NATO's future engagement in the region is emphasizing that it is not an issue of membership or no membership. NATO programs of a wide variety serve to transform, over time, the regional security picture overall for all the

countries of the region –with or without membership. PfP is building political and military bridges between member countries, both between NATO members and non-members but also among non-members. This in itself increases security in these regions and accelerates military reform, while simultaneously having a positive effect in general on political development and accountability. Most importantly, through training programs, participation in peacekeeping missions, and exercises, PfP helps foster a new generation of military officers whose thinking differs markedly from the Soviet military mentality of their predecessors.

There is a long list of steps that can be taken which, short of membership, will both symbolically (through NATO's very engagement in the region) and through very practical steps bolster the security, statehood, and political development of the South Caucasus.

This process has already begun with the role of PfP in the region. Through its activities, which began slowly in the mid-1990s but have accelerated since, PfP proved effective in contributing to security sector reform. The weak, ineffective, and Soviet-style defense and security sectors in the South Caucasus states were exposed to western military structures. Moreover, in addition to multilateral cooperation, PfP helped expand bilateral cooperation between the three regional states and NATO members, of which Turkey, the U.S., the U.K., Greece, and Germany have been some of the most active. In so doing, PfP contributed to capacity-building in the regional militaries, but also contributed to bringing democratic principles into these government structures, including civilian control over the military forces. These processes are far from accomplished, but PfP and western bilateral cooperation has contributed to much of the progress that has been achieved.

In NATO and PfP relations with the South Caucasus, the extent and depth of cooperation with Azerbaijan and Georgia is of a different order than that with Armenia. Azerbaijan and Georgia have been enthusiastic contributors, providing peacekeeping forces in small quantities to operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq from the outset. Azerbaijan and Georgia have contributed ever-larger troop numbers to peacekeeping, beginning with platoon-size deployments in the Balkans, force contingents in Afghanistan, and significantly larger numbers in Iraq, despite immense pressure for Moscow to the contrary.⁶ Armenia has also, since 2002 and particularly 2003, become a much more

6 "Azerbaijan Ready to Send Soldiers to Iraq," *Pravda*, 22 April 2003; and "Azerbaijan: Staunch Ally and Strong Partner," *Azerbaijan Newsletter*, released by the Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Washington DC, 5 March 2004.

active participant in PfP, seeking to diversify its security relationship with Russia through links to the West.

NATO's Istanbul summit is ideally timed and placed for the overdue political recognition by the Euro-Atlantic community of Georgia's and Azerbaijan's aspirations to eventual membership in NATO. Most important for these two countries, and Armenia, should it choose to join in this initiative, is not the issue of membership per se; but that the Euro-Atlantic community, through NATO, asserts that the security of the countries of the South Caucasus is an integral part of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, and recognizes the role of the regional states in this process.

Concrete initiatives, of course, should naturally follow from this. The recent report produced by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute on this issue, and on which this article is based, provides a list of specific recommendations both for NATO and the South Caucasus states.⁷ The most important of these include:

- Exploring the possibility of creating a special format for NATO's dialogue with the three nations of the South Caucasus, on the model of those set up for Ukraine and Russia;
- Exploring the possibility of creating a Regional Defense College in the South Caucasus, similar in concept to that of the Baltic Defense College (BALTDEFCOL) and building on its experience.
- Greatly enhancing the number of regional officers receiving training through PfP in order to foster a cadre of officers benefiting from contact with Western militaries that, in turn, are able to share their knowledge and expertise with colleagues;
- Raising the profile of the region in NATO's own hierarchy by appointing a political/military specialist as an advisor to the Secretary-General on the region; creating a "Security Working Group" under NATO in order to optimize security assistance efforts; and prioritizing the development of expertise amongst NATO's planning staffs on the IPAPs of the regional states.

While this approach proposes an *à la carte* approach to NATO involvement as most promising to the interests of South Caucasus countries, it asserts that such an approach is impossible without a focused and strategic approach to the South Caucasus as a whole on the part of NATO.

⁷ The policy paper in its entirety is available at <<http://www.silkroadstudies.org/nato.pdf>>.

A central feature of this approach is the defining of NATO and U.S. interests and goals without regard for Russian responses. Russia itself is in flux and its policies a half decade hence may differ from those of today, especially as they relate to former Soviet territories. If NATO and the U.S. demonstrate that their policies in the South Caucasus are compatible with Russia's legitimate security concerns (as opposed to political aspirations), and can even be supportive of them, it enhances the possibility that Russians not committed to zero-sum thinking may gain influence in Moscow. Clarity by NATO in defining its own strategy, directness in articulating it, and flexibility in its execution are the hallmarks of any future success.

In sum, anchoring the South Caucasus to the Euro-Atlantic system must begin by projecting security to this region. The costs and the draw on resources would only be a fraction of U.S. and NATO efforts elsewhere; the social and political environment in this region is friendly and receptive; and the strategic payoff to the Alliance would be of historic proportions. Until now, the U.S. has taken the lead in this effort, with only nominal support from other Alliance members. At present, U.S. global overextension means that European allies must increase their contributions to projecting stability and security in the South Caucasus. NATO's new members such as the Baltic States and Romania, familiar with this region and sharing their recent experience as post-Soviet legacy states and NATO aspirants, are enthusiastic about contributing to this effort alongside older allies.

Such recognition can at this time take the form of offering Azerbaijan and Georgia a clear prospect of membership through Individual Partnership Action Plans (IPAPs) leading to Membership Action Plans (MAPs). With their established benchmarks, standards and timetables for progress, such plans hold built-in incentives for aspiring countries, as well as amounting to non-declaratory political recognition by the Alliance of their membership goals.