

**NATO
IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD AND
ITS RELATIONS
WITH KAZAKHSTAN
(ACCORDING TO AN EXPERT OPINION POLL)**

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In 2008 the Institute of World Economy and Politics at the First President of the RK Foundation together with the Eurasian Rating Agency circulated a questionnaire in the expert community of Kazakhstan on NATO's role in the contemporary world and its relations with the RK. The authors have undertaken to summarize the results.

The dynamic changes in NATO caused a wide response in the academic, expert, and political community, which was expressed in an avalanche of statements, publications, and studies of real academic value; some of them were obviously suggested by the demands of the times. We all know that since the 1990s the Alliance has been trying to adjust itself to the changing realities and has been actively looking for a new role on the Western and international political scene. Based on the collective defense principle NATO is living through a multisided transformation effort designed to adapt its strategy, tactics, and military-political potential to the changes obvious in the sphere of international security, the scope and intensity of which nobody could predict.

Globalization of its strategic activities and stronger position as a factor of the international security architecture that affects the strategic situation in several regions of the world is one of the results of these transformations. NATO is doing a lot to identify and justify the missions found outside the functions outlined in its strategic documents; it is concentrating on the antiterrorist struggle, crisis settlement, and peacekeeping, expansion of its cooperation with the non-members, etc. Its Armed Forces are being modernized and the command and control structure optimized together with the AF's technical potential; their operational activity has been upgraded to allow NATO to deploy its troops anywhere in the world, etc. The bloc is rapidly acquiring political dimensions and attaching ever greater importance to the diplomatic and non-military aspects of international cooperation.

To a certain extent NATO is going global—it is gradually extending by adopting new members and widening the zone of its strategic activity. For the sake of its own security it is actively “attaching” the so-called young democracies of southeastern Europe (Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina,

Macedonia, and Albania) and the East (Ukraine, probably Belarus and Armenia). Well-known Kazakhstani political scientist Murat Laumulin has pointed out that NATO is working on strategies designed to involve the largest number of states in Western geopolitics. To achieve this aim it is building up its geopolitical presence in all parts of the globe.¹

Central Asia's highly advantageous geographic location made it indispensable for the Alliance, which is seeking control over regions of military-strategic importance; today Brussels is sparing no effort to incorporate Central Asia into its collective security system. This cannot but cause concern in two other large power centers (Russia and China), which see the Alliance's expansion as challenging their interests. Countermeasures are inevitable. In fact, the still latent geopolitical rivalry in the region between the U.S. and NATO, on the one hand, and the RF and PRC, on the other, began in 2001 when the North-Atlantic Alliance set up military bases in some of the Central Asian countries. As a result Russia and China consolidated their positions through the SCO; the CSTO stepped up its regional involvement while the United States had to remove its base from Uzbekistan; America and Kyrgyzstan have to settle disagreements that resurface from time to time, etc. All this has already largely changed the region's military-political set up. The current problems notwithstanding, NATO is obviously resolved to stay put in this region of huge strategic importance: it will build up its presence and will not withdraw its troops.

Today, the Alliance attracted by Kazakhstan's regional leadership and its consistent foreign policies has been concentrating on the republic actively involved in the NATO regional initiatives. NATO leaders refer to the Republic of Kazakhstan as their key regional partner. Kazakhstan, in turn, regards its purposeful and constructive cooperation with NATO as one of the key strategic foreign policy trends. It is the only Central Asian state that signed the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP); the first two-year plan of cooperation was completed in April 2008. Today a new document for the next two years is being drafted. NATO membership is not contemplated, but Astana needs fruitful cooperation with the Alliance for the sake of Kazakhstan's upgraded defense capability and stability in the region. This adds importance to an analysis of the current state and prospects of cooperation between NATO and Kazakhstan: it not merely opens new strategic horizons and offers various possibilities but also creates potential (geopolitical) risks for Kazakhstan and its Central Asian neighbors.

The above explains the expert opinion poll: it was designed to identify the key trends in understanding and interpreting NATO's role in the world today and its presence in Central Asia, as well as in clarifying what the expert community thinks about the present and future of Kazakhstan-NATO cooperation. The questionnaire was distributed among the leading independent experts in economic and political studies and their colleagues employed by the state and private structures. The expert community, the better informed part of society, interprets the prominent problems for the wide public through the media where it offers its comments on the hottest political and economic issues. The state structures, likewise, rely on expert opinions.

The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions with multiple-choice answers and invited experts to offer their opinions if they differed from the suggested options. Questions 1 to 3 were related to NATO's present state caused by the changed role in the post-Cold War period and the relations among its member states. The second set of questions (Nos. 4-8) invited the experts to state their opinions about the NATO military contingent deployed in the region in 2001. Questions Nos. 9-11 were related to the relations between NATO and the parallel security structures present in the region (the CSTO and SCO). The remaining four questions invited the experts to assess the present state and future of Kazakhstan's cooperation with NATO.

¹ See: M. Laumulin, *Tsentral'naia Azia v zarubezhnoy politologii i mirovoy geopolitike*, Vol. II, *Vneshniaia politika i strategiya SShA na sovremennom etape i Tsentral'naia Azia*, KISI under the President of the RK, Almaty, 2006, p. 150.

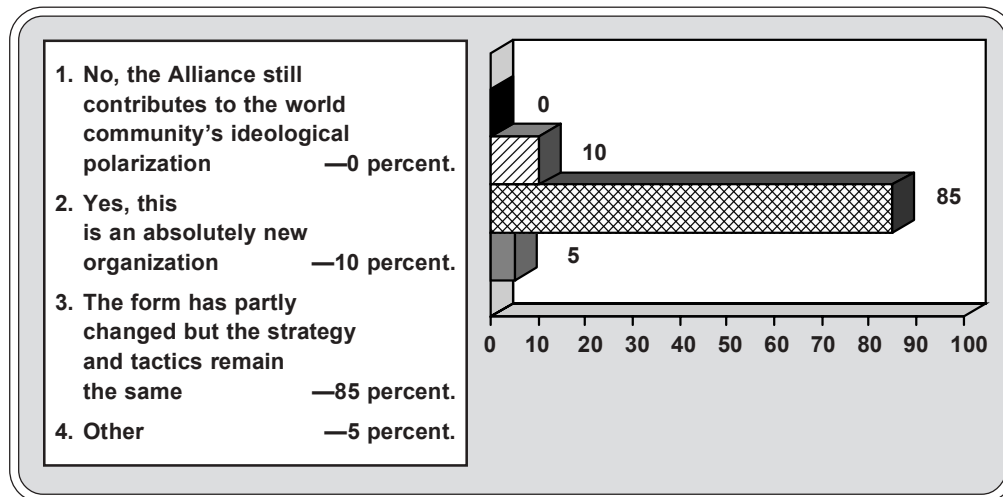
The first question was intended to measure the depth of the changes in NATO that have taken place in the more than fifteen years that affected the bloc's strategy and the tools used to achieve the aims. The Alliance's documents and statements of the member states declare that NATO today is a new structure with new tasks in the spheres of politics and security and new tools used to address these tasks.

This was approved by 10 percent of the polled; the absolute majority of the expert community (85 percent) pointed out that although changed externally, the new form concealed the old strategy and tactics.

One of the polled who marked his opinion as "Other" pointed out: "Today NATO can be described as a different organization, the potential of which can be used to increase Central Asian security and the relations between the local states and the West."

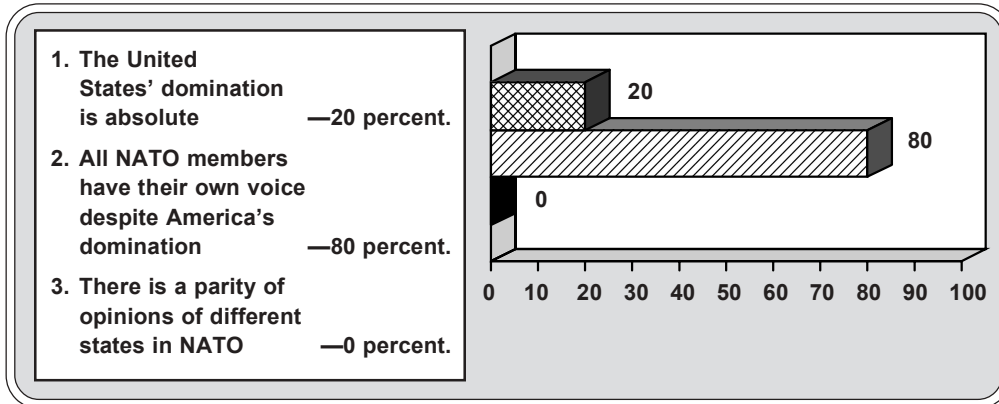
None of the respondents chose the first variant, which asserted that the Alliance was still promoting the world community's ideological polarization. This means that the traditional strategic line notwithstanding, NATO has undergone radical changes that have affected its image and the perception of its policies.

- 1. Since the 1990s NATO has been engaged in complex transformations, it changed its conception and the format of its activities as well as its role in world politics. To what extent has the transformed organization changed?**



The international expert community agrees, on the whole, that because of its military-economic advantages over its European allies Washington completely dominates over NATO while the organization is nothing more than an instrument the United States uses to realize its geopolitical interests. Twenty percent of the polled agreed with the above while 80 percent of the respondents pointed out that, despite America's domination, all the NATO members have their own voices. They probably referred to the grave crisis created by the disagreements among the NATO members over the war in Iraq in 2003-2004. The Iraqi issue dissipated the previously popular myth about the members' common identity and their unanimity in the military-political sphere. It should be pointed out that none of the polled agreed with the statement that there was a parity of opinions inside the organization (something fully justified by the members' vastly different military-economic contributions).

2. What, in your opinion, is the correlation of the interests of the United States and the other members in NATO's policies?

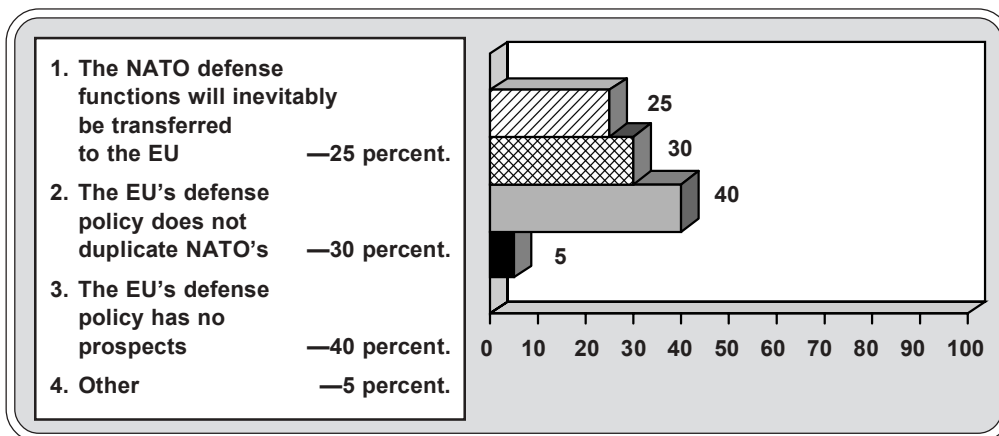


We all know that, according to the ideologists of EU integration, its economic and political integration should acquire a military dimension. It was back in the 1990s that the Europeans agreed to create a defense project of their own able, some time in future, to replace NATO.

The Kazakhstani experts could not agree when answering the third question: a quarter of the polled believed that the defense functions of NATO would inevitably be transferred to the EU; 30 percent were convinced that the EU's defense policies were not duplicating NATO's; the larger share (40 percent) was convinced that the EU's defense policy had no future. This pattern of answers is probably caused by the fact that Europe's potential of defense construction remains vague; the process has been under way for many years without tangible results.

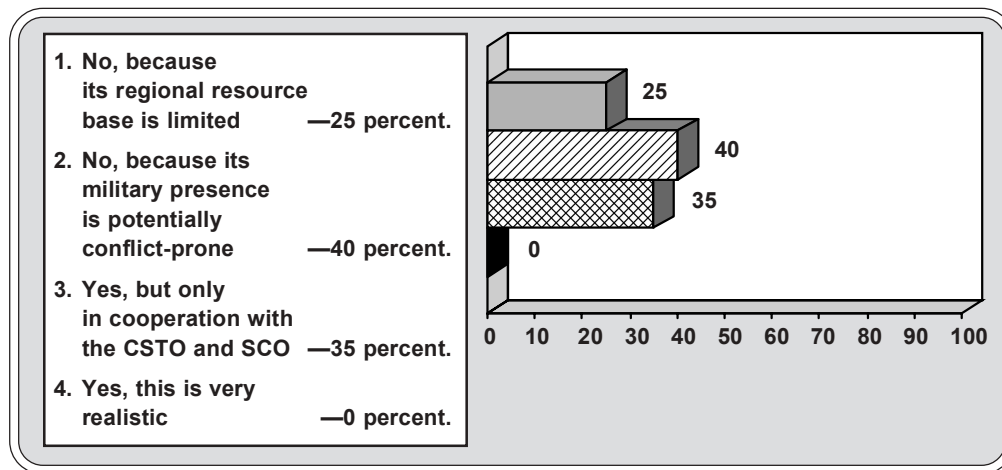
It seems that the expert who selected the "Other" option supplied the most rational comment: "Purely defensive functions will probably remain NATO's prerogative; however the EU is able to address the security issues independently of NATO as part of its united foreign policy designed to ensure the European Union's security."

3. The majority of the NATO members belong to the EU. How does the EU's desire to pursue its own defense policy correlate with NATO?



Since the early 1990s the Alliance has been consistently developing its military-political cooperation with the Central Asian states. From the moment when NATO deployed its forces in some of the region's states it has been playing the role of one of the elements of a fairly complicated and multilayered system of regional security in Central Asia. In 2004 the NATO leaders officially proclaimed it a zone of their strategic interests and have been trying to expand its political and military presence in the region as, they claim, a pillar of regional security. According to Kazakhstani experts NATO is not yet ready to shoulder the main responsibility for Central Asian security. The majority (40 percent) of them believes that NATO's military presence is potentially conflict-prone; while 25 percent believe that NATO cannot shoulder the responsibility because of the fairly limited resource base. Thirty-five percent in turn do not exclude this possibility but believe it can only be in close cooperation with the CSTO and the SCO. In view of the present tactics of distancing itself from both structures NATO's prospects as the Central Asian leader are vague.

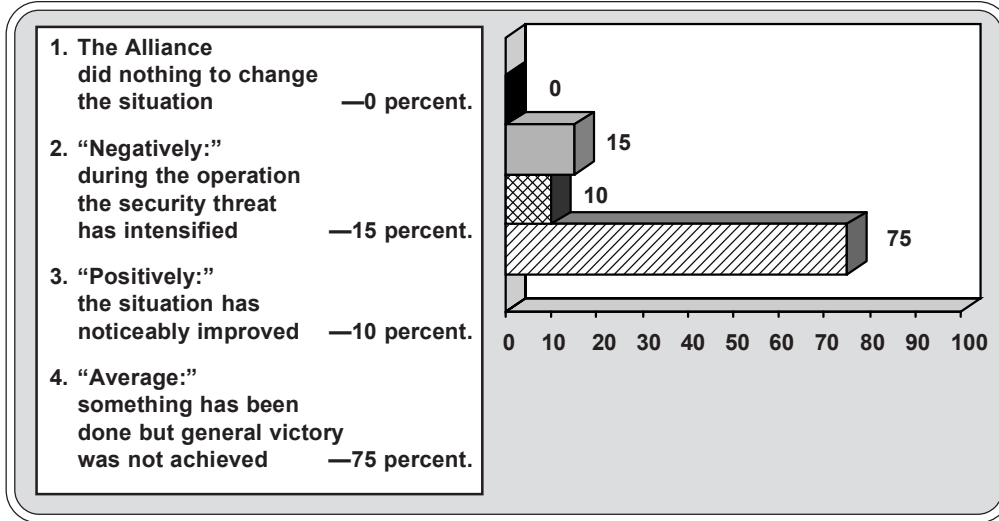
4. Does NATO have the potential and possibility of shouldering the main burden of responsibility for Central Asian security?



The above is complemented by the answers to the question about the results of the ISAF peacekeeping operation in Afghanistan unfolding under NATO command. It can be regarded as an indicator of the Alliance's possibilities and efficiency of its security policy in the region. A mere 10 percent of the polled thought positively of the NATO-led operation in Afghanistan; while 15 percent sided with the "Negative" option and pointed out that the operation created new and stronger threats.

It should be said that both groups are right on the whole: the results of the ISAF peacekeeping operation are contradictory. On the one hand, Afghanistan has taken certain steps in the direction of state development; its economy is being reconstructed thanks to foreign aid while extremist activities have subsided. On the other hand, however, the Karzai Cabinet supported by the NATO Armed Forces controls the territory in patches; heroin production in Afghanistan and drug trafficking across Central Asia have grown manifold; the Taliban resurgence has made the military situation more intense. This makes the option selected by the majority (75 percent), according to which the six years of the war produced limited success, the correct one. Indeed, no general success has been achieved so far.

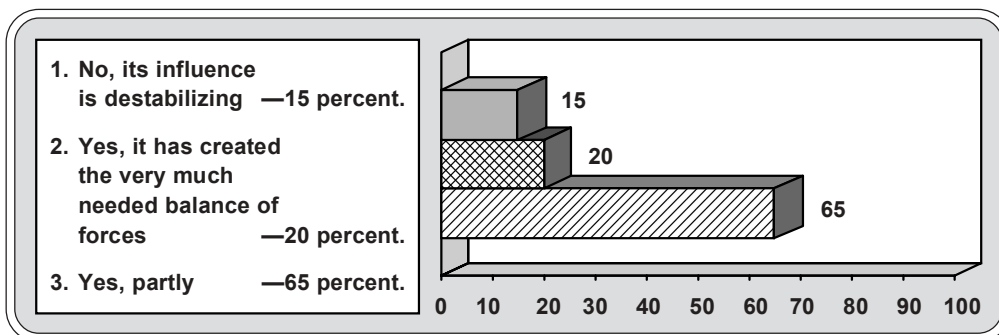
5. How do you assess the results of the NATO-led ISAF peacekeeping operation in Afghanistan?



Only 15 percent of the Kazakhstani experts gave a negative response to the question of whether NATO's military presence corresponded to the interests of the local states. Those who chose the negative response were convinced that the Alliance's impact was detrimental to regional stability. The larger part of the polled (65 percent) believed that its military presence was in the interests of the Central Asian states to a certain extent; while 20 percent of the analysts argued that NATO military presence, which created a balance of forces, obviously served the interests of the local states.

It seems that the Western military presence in Central Asia (which offers alternative international cooperation) balances out, to a certain extent, Russia's and China's powerful geopolitical impact. The region's geopolitical structure underwent considerable changes in the context of NATO's military presence; by the same token this created new risks for the local states and offered them new prospects. Aware of the intensive rivalry, Moscow and Beijing readjusted their regional policies, from which the local states also profited.

6. Does NATO's military presence in Central Asia correspond to the interest of the local states?

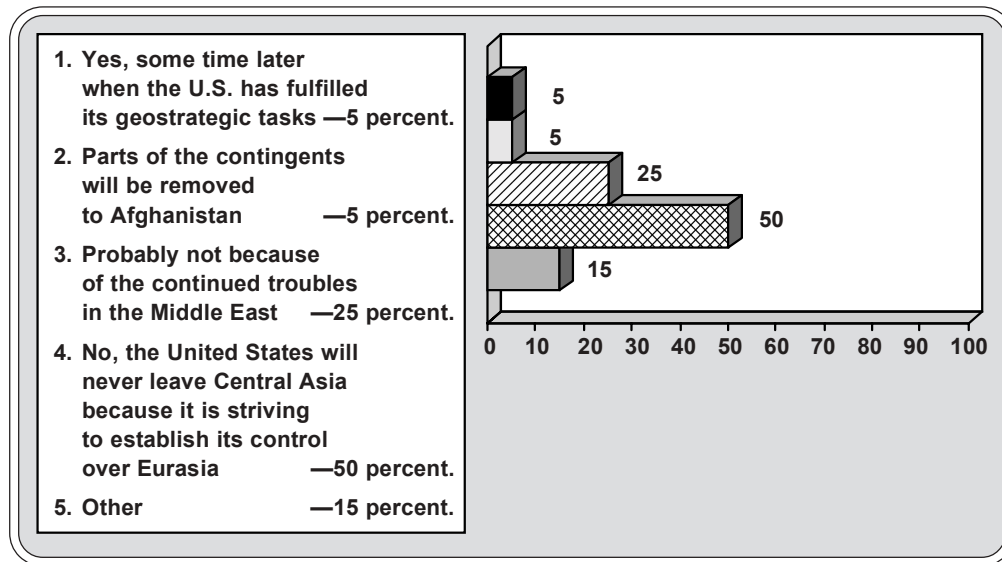


The dispute around the Western military presence in Central Asia is riveted on the question of whether the U.S. and NATO will pull their military contingents out of the region in the near future. The expert community is divided over the issue—a wide range of opinions was naturally reflected in the answers to the questionnaire. The larger part believes that the U.S. and NATO have come to stay; 25 percent believe that the Middle Eastern complications are responsible for this; and half of the polled pointed to America's obvious desire to control Eurasia as the main reason for its continued military presence in Central Asia.

Five percent still expects that the military contingents will be moved to Afghanistan; a mere 5 percent believes that the United States will evacuate its military contingents from Central Asia as soon as its geostrategic tasks have been fulfilled. The majority of those who selected "Other" expects that the future of the American and NATO military bases is in the hands of the leaders of the corresponding Central Asian states and Moscow's partial involvement.

It should be said that the future of the American and NATO military bases in Central Asia is dim: despite the no-nonsense calls on Washington to identify the time limits within which it will pull out of the region America is trying to expand its presence. It seems that even if Moscow and Beijing together with the Central Asian states increase their pressure on Washington it might move its forces to Afghanistan and leave the region. The local oil and related business interests and investments are behind America's continued military presence in Central Asia; it can be cut short only by wide-scale public protests in the United States and NATO members that might cause domestic political crises in these countries.

7. Will the United States and NATO withdraw their military contingents from Central Asia in the near future?

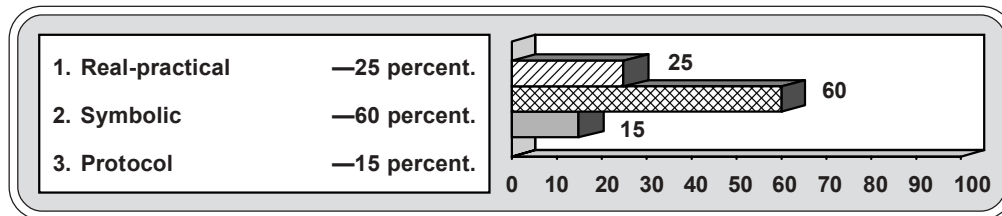


The Partnership for Peace Program is the linchpin of the NATO-Central Asian countries' cooperation, which embraces a wide spectrum of military and non-military issues. Over half of the experts, however, describe the Program's importance for the region as symbolic; they are convinced that it is much more important for NATO, which is seeking wider zones of its strategic activity. Fifteen percent is convinced that the program is of merely protocol importance that promotes diplomatic relations with individual NATO members.

A quarter of the respondents believes that the program is of real and practical importance that strengthens the technical potential and upgrades the defense capability of the Central Asian states, as well as improves their interoperability with the NATO forces indispensable for future joint missions.

The variety of answers can be explained by the fact that not all the local states, for different reasons, are equally involved in the program. Kazakhstan, which signed the IPAP in 2006, is one of the most active participants. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with NATO armed forces deployed on their territories, are noticeably active; in 2005 the program was practically discontinued in Uzbekistan while Turkmenistan prefers to remain an observer.

8. How can you describe the importance of the Partnership for Peace program for the Central Asian countries?

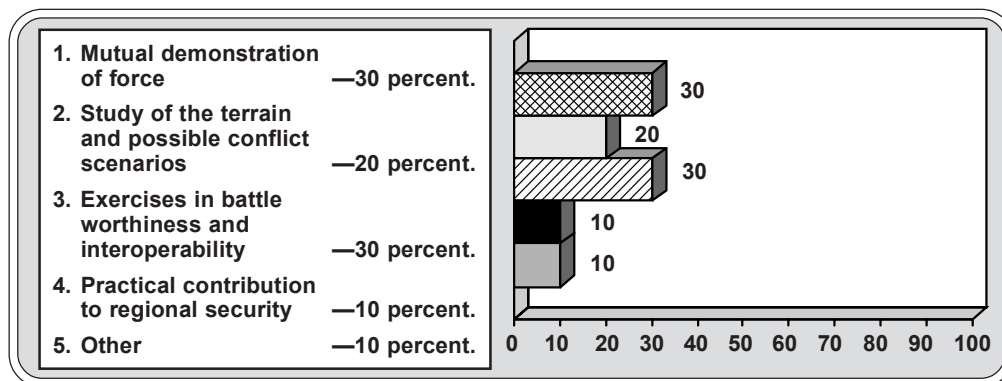


The strategic activity of the United States and NATO urged the Russian Federation and China to step up their Central Asian involvement mainly through the integration structures (the CSTO and SCO). Today, NATO, CSTO, and SCO are obviously competing for deeper cooperation with the local states. Central Asian territory is regularly used for military exercises (Rubezh under the CSTO, Peaceful Mission under the SCO, and Steppe Eagle with NATO involvement).

The expert community has no unanimous opinion on the issue. Thirty percent is convinced that the military exercises are nothing but a demonstration of force of the structures involved; 20 percent believe that they are held to study the terrain and the scenarios of possible conflicts; 30 percent described them as an exercise in battle worthiness and interoperability, while only 10 percent believes that they improve the region’s security.

Those who opted for the “Other” variant explained that the exercises were a combination of the four choices. This looks like the most adequate position: it more or less correctly reflects reality—the exercises are being carried out to upgrade the battle worthiness of the forces involved, improve interoperability, and demonstrate potential.

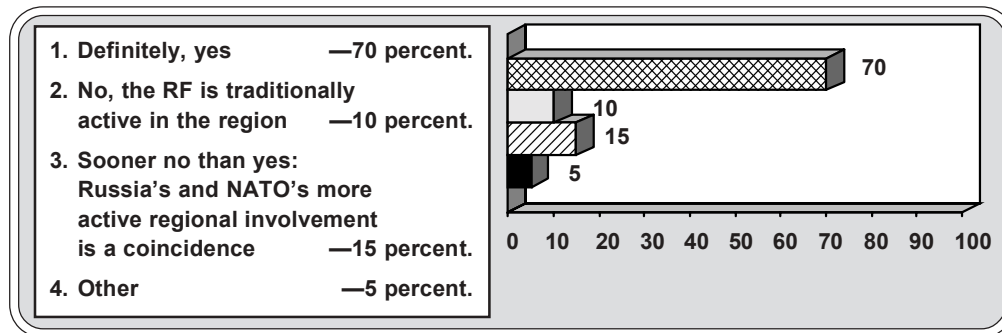
9. The annual military exercises in Central Asia—Rubezh under the CSTO aegis; Peaceful Mission under SCO, and Steppe Eagle with NATO involvement—are:



In recent years Russia has stepped up its integration efforts in Central Asia in the military-political (through the SCO and CSTO) and economic (through the EurAsEC) spheres. Most of the experts (70 percent) believe it was the presence of the NATO military contingent that urged Moscow to forward economic and political initiatives in Central Asia. These macro-projects serve one aim: Russia's stronger regional position and narrowing down NATO's and America's spheres of activity.

A quarter of the polled did not detect any correspondence between the intensified involvement of Moscow and Brussels; 10 percent believes that Russia is demonstrating its traditional diplomatic involvement; and 15 percent dismisses the simultaneous intensified activity of Russia and NATO as a mere coincidence. The "Other" option is dominated by those who believe that stronger NATO involvement was an important (but not the main) factor behind Russia's more active diplomatic presence in Central Asia.

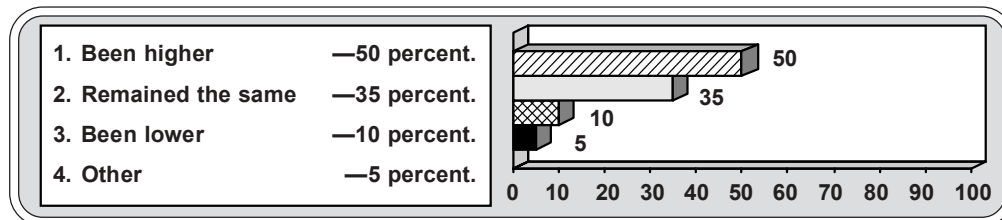
10. Can Russia's stepped up integration activities in Central Asia (within the SCO, CSTO, and EurAsEC) be described as Moscow's response to NATO's stronger post-2001 position?



For several years now the CSTO has been inviting NATO to cooperate; the expert community on the whole is convinced that an effective security system in Central Asia calls for, if not cooperation between the CSTO, SCO, and NATO, at least for their regular consultations. There is a more or less widespread opinion that tripartite cooperation could upgrade regional security and defuse geopolitical tension. Half of the polled agrees with this while 35 percent sides with the opinion that the situation in Central Asia and Afghanistan and the security level will remain the same. Ten percent agrees that the situation in the security sphere will deteriorate.

One of the experts contributed the most realistic answer by picking the "Other" option: he argued that the SCO and CSTO were not ready for bilateral, to say nothing of tripartite, cooperation which would involve NATO in the very sensitive security sphere.

11. Had NATO agreed to tripartite military cooperation and consultations with the CSTO and SCO on the situation in Central Asia and Afghanistan the security level in the region would have:

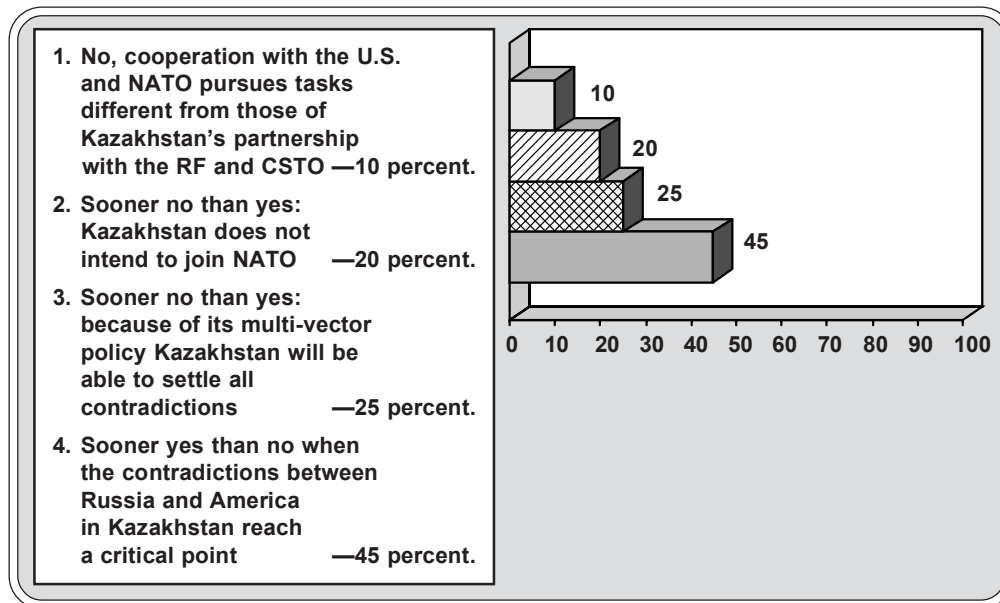


While following its multi-vector foreign policy course Kazakhstan is equally involved in military-political cooperation with Russia, America, and NATO, which is enforced in the republic's new military doctrine. Even though its military cooperation with different partners pursues different aims, there is the opinion that it might create risks in the future. This is what 45 percent of the respondents are convinced of: they believe that at some point the clash between Russia's and America's interests in Kazakhstan could reach a critical point.

Forty-five percent, however, believes that risks are probable not possible; 20 percent thinks that risks are impossible because the republic is not seeking NATO membership; 25 percent is convinced that the republic can settle all problems by diplomatic means; and 10 percent rules out any risks because Kazakhstan is pursuing different aims when cooperating with NATO and the CSTO.

It seems that its balanced position allows Kazakhstan to skillfully maneuver between two centers of power first, without being drawn into the orbit of one of them, and second, being able to realize its interests in upgrading its battle worthiness and modernization of its Armed Forces. Even though it signed the IPAP with NATO, which presupposes closer cooperation, it never doubted its obligations to Russia as its military ally.

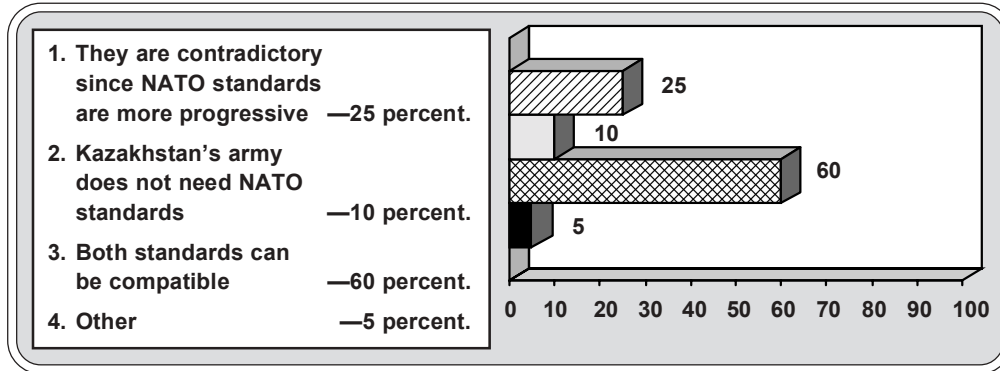
12. Are there potential risks for Kazakhstan created by its closer cooperation with the U.S. and NATO?



This question suggests another no less complicated question related to Kazakhstan's military cooperation with Russia and NATO. Deeper military-technical cooperation accumulates Russian armaments and materiel in Kazakhstan used by the CSTO members, as well as NATO-standard armaments needed for effective interoperability in the event of joint operations of the RK Armed Forces and NATO. In the future the army of Kazakhstan will use two different standards of weapons and materiel that will either improve its battle worthiness or disorganize the army. According to the majority of the polled analysts (60 percent), it is possible to combine both standards; 10 percent remains convinced that the army does not need NATO standards while 25 percent believes that the two standards are contradictory (NATO equipment was believed to be more progressive).

The cautious assessments are fully justified—the issue is far from simple and calls for careful consideration of how the two standards can be used together—so far this remains to be seen.

13. How does the desire of Kazakhstan’s leaders correlate with NATO and “Soviet” CSTO standards?

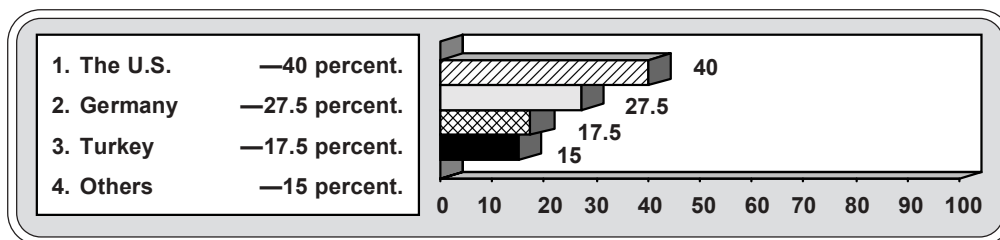


Continued cooperation with NATO promoted Kazakhstan’s cooperation with its members. The multiple-choice answers included the United States, Germany, and Turkey. The largest share of the polled (40 percent) chose the U.S. as the NATO member with which Kazakhstan has the most effective and useful cooperation. This is quite natural: Washington is the driving force behind NATO-Central Asia cooperation; the United States is involved more than any other member in modernization of the republic’s Armed Forces.

Germany with 27.5 percent was the second most popular choice followed by Turkey with 17.5 percent. This is explained by the fact that since the early 1990s these two states have been more active than the others in Kazakhstan (especially in military cooperation within NATO). Some experts believe that none of the NATO members can be singled out as a priority military partner; others point out that the republic’s cooperation with NATO as a whole is most useful; pessimists point out that in this context “effective and useful” are overstatements.

We believe, however, that it was quite right to identify individual countries because not all NATO members are active in the region and not all of them want military cooperation with Kazakhstan.

14. With which NATO members does Kazakhstan have the most effective and useful cooperation?



It is a well known fact that Kazakhstan does not plan to join NATO in either the short- or long-term perspective; its desire to deepen its cooperation with this structure is caused by Astana’s intention to be more actively involved in ensuring international security, to acquire experience of modern

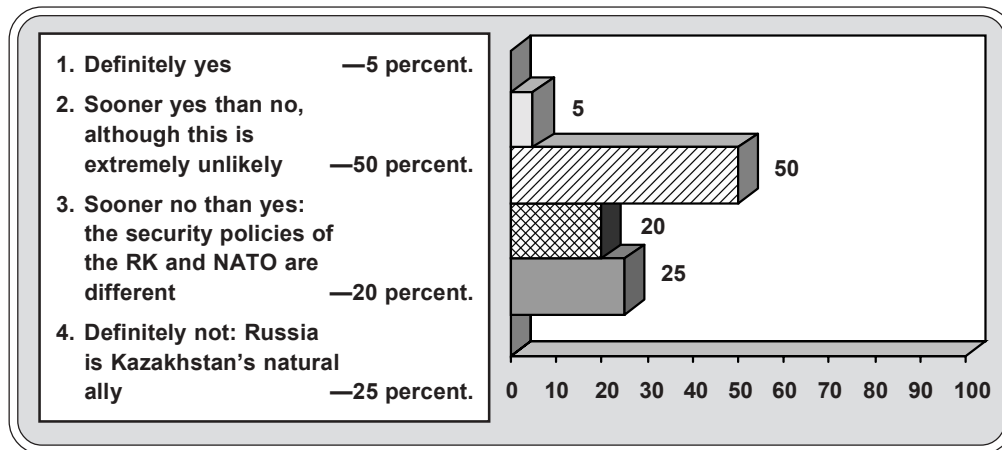
command and control skills, and to gain access to the latest military technologies and armaments. While offering its initiatives the NATO leaders know that it is useless to discuss Kazakhstan's membership. The question of whether the policy of drawing closer to NATO with the aim of joining it in the near future corresponds to the country's national interests produced unexpected and thought-provoking results.

Fifty percent of the polled believes that NATO membership will promote Kazakhstan's national interests to a certain extent but it is unlikely to come to fruition; while 5 percent are convinced that NATO membership fully corresponds to the republic's interests. It seems that those who supplied this answer proceeded from the fact that NATO possesses real military experience and powerful military-technical potential and that it is supported by influential power centers, which can have numerous advantages for Kazakhstan and offer new possibilities. It should be said, however, that due to the country's geopolitical location and historical prerequisites, the potential risks and problems created by NATO membership will outweigh the potential advantages.

Twenty percent points out that NATO membership is not in the interests of Kazakhstan because of their divergent security policies. We, in turn, believe that their security policies are divergent on the global level and identical when it comes to the struggle against terrorism and extremism, drug trafficking, illegal migration, and the proliferation of WMD.

A quarter of the polled chose the "Definitely not" answer to the question because Russia is Kazakhstan's natural ally. It seems that this answer is the most realistic and corresponds to the official foreign policy course, according to which the Russian Federation is Kazakhstan's strategic ally. Kazakhstan has never planned to join NATO and is unlikely to plan this in the future because its membership will cause considerable geopolitical transformations with unpredictable results.

15. Can the policy of drawing closer to NATO with the aim of requesting NATO membership in the near future promote Kazakhstan's national interests?



* * *

On the whole the results demonstrated an adequate and realistic assessment of NATO's current development as well as the balanced position of the Kazakhstani expert community in relation to NATO policy and strategy. The U.S. and NATO military presence in Central Asia is seen as a long-term fac-

tor that strongly affects Russia's strategy. NATO's active involvement in the region forces Moscow to step up its efforts designed to limit the scope of NATO's regional activities.

Cooperation between Kazakhstan and NATO is assessed as favorable for the former's geopolitical and military interests while a detailed analysis of the answers demonstrated that the expert community on the whole is fairly optimistic about potentially closer cooperation. This is confirmed in particular by the high share of positive answers to the question of possible correlation of NATO and CSTO standards in Kazakhstan's army. The expert community also agrees that closer military-political cooperation with the United States and NATO will hardly create risks for Kazakhstan; even if they do emerge Astana, according to the widely shared opinion, will be able to settle any disagreements by diplomatic means. The fact that over half of the polled pointed out that NATO membership would promote Kazakhstan's national interests came as a surprise even though in real life this thesis remains ambiguous.

Today the sides find the current level of cooperation satisfactory: they can address their tasks without irritating either Russia or China. Under the present conditions the Alliance could have expanded its regional involvement in the most effective and least conflicting way by establishing contacts with the CSTO and SCO. This would have allowed NATO, on the one hand, to reduce the Russian-Chinese pressure on the Alliance and to address many of its problems more successfully, including those in Afghanistan. On the other hand, NATO would have been able to deepen its cooperation with the Central Asian states in their capacity as CSTO and SCO members without irritating the Russia-China tandem.