

NATO Looks to Central Asia

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The strategically-important former Soviet republics now have the opportunity to work more closely with the alliance.

The ongoing "war on terror" has led to a change in how NATO views the Central Asian nations.

The five former Soviet republics, which are not members of the alliance but participate in its Partnership for Peace Programme, are being encouraged to strengthen their ties with NATO.

This new era of cooperation was announced at NATO's recent Prague summit. "We encourage partners, including the countries of the strategically-important regions of Caucasus and Central Asia, to take advantage of these mechanisms," read an alliance statement.

The September 11 attack on America lent new importance to the Central Asian countries with coalition forces setting up bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, to launch operations in neighbouring Afghanistan.

According to Central Asian expert Donald Jensen, the region can be used as staging post for combating extremist networks based in South Asia. It is also convenient as a place to organise intelligence operations against radical groups both inside and outside the region.

Rustam Jumaev, a spokesperson for Uzbek president Islam Karimov, told IWPR of his fears for the stability of the region. In spite of the new interim administration in Afghanistan, which borders three Central Asian republics, he said security was still a great concern.

The fundamentalist Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, still poses a threat to the region. The group, which has links to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda organisation, has been blacklisted by the US.

"Although the main forces of the IMU were defeated after war in Afghanistan, there are still pockets of the group hiding in Afghan territory and in the neighbouring countries," Jumaev said.

"This group attempted to sneak back into Central Asia this year. Although they were unsuccessful, we cannot exclude the fact that remnants of the IMU might try to re-group."

As well as boosting security, NATO can help the Central Asian nations tackle the problem of drug trafficking across their territory. The region is a main transit route for smugglers taking narcotics from Afghanistan to Russia and beyond.

"It is via this route that drugs find their way onto the streets of European cities such as London and Berlin," said NATO spokeswoman Stefanie Babst.

She added that this prompted some within the alliance to argue that the body should pay more attention to what is happening at the periphery of its sphere of influence, especially drug smuggling, which is a major source of funding for armed groups.

Central Asian governments have confirmed that this problem is on the rise. In a summit speech, Kazak president Nursultan Nazarbaev said the volume of narcotics being trafficked had increased in recent times.

President Karimov echoed this view in his address, noting that extremists are now joining forces with drug traffickers and pointing out that there is lack of coordination between international organisations and regional governments implementing anti-smuggling programmes.

However, analysts fear that talk of war, extremism and security will sideline concern over human rights and the development of democracy. It seems that the international community's demand for reforms has been overshadowed by the need to secure the cooperation of Central Asian republics in military matters.

Dismissing criticism that the US is aligning itself too closely with authoritarian Central Asian governments, President George W Bush said, "The more people ... work with the US, the more likely it is that they will work to improve the human condition."

An official from a western political institution told IWPR admitted there is not much the alliance can do to encourage Central Asian leaders to improve democracy in the region. "NATO is an inter-governmental organisation. It does not have the apparatus to influence these countries in the same way as the individual countries in the alliance can," he said.

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Location: Caucasus
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Uzbekistan
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