The West’s growing interest in the Caspian Basin and NATO’s increasing concern with challenges on its periphery raise an important question for the Atlantic Alliance as it ponders its future role, commitments, and security responsibilities: Given the nature of the West’s security interests in the Caspian and Central Asia regions and the potential threats to those interests, what role should NATO play in a broader Western security strategy for the area?

A great deal of what has been written and said in the West about the Caspian has lacked perspective. Many observers of the contemporary Caspian scene have become intoxicated with the region’s potential energy riches and the jockeying for influence among several major powers and international oil companies. The images that have been conjured up of a new “great game” often serve to obscure rather than clarify reality. As a result, many Western views of the Caspian over the past decade have been marked by hype and slogans rather than hard-headed analysis. This report tries to put the south Caucasus and Central Asia into a broader strategic perspective. The authors critically examine NATO’s interests, priorities, capabilities and constraints, and the political, economic, cultural, and security forces shaping the regional security environment. After carefully weighing the benefits of deepening the Alliance’s involvement in the region against the risks and costs, the authors suggest that NATO should see the region, in general, more as a potential quagmire than as a strategic vacuum waiting to be filled.

This study is part of a larger project on the implications of the changing strategic environment in and around Europe for the United
States and NATO. The project was sponsored by the Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Air Force in Europe, and by the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Headquarters, United States Air Force. It was conducted in the Strategy and Doctrine Program of RAND’s Project AIR FORCE. This study should be of particular interest to NATO planners, officials in the U.S. government and Western countries involved in making policy toward Central Asia and the south Caucasus, and, more broadly, anyone interested in the implications of post–Cold War geopolitical dynamics for U.S. military planning and operations.

PROJECT AIR FORCE

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