NATO expansion in full swing

*by Sevim Dagdelen**



Sevim Dagdelen. (Picture sevimdagdelen.de)

Whilst the issue of Ukraine's accession to NATO has been put on hold for the time being in the US's negotiations with Russia, the military alliance is on a course of expansion across the entire region between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. Washington is regarded as the driving force behind this – as it is with all key NATO decisions. The Alliance is strengthening its presence, forging closer partnerships and, in doing so, following a long-established strategic script.

Following attacks on merchant ships off the coasts of Bulgaria and Romania outside their territorial waters – which were once again attributed to Russia without concrete evidence – NATO has decided to significantly increase its presence in the Black Sea. On 20 October 2026, the Alliance announced the deployment of a US military reconnaissance aircraft under NATO command. Romania also plans, together with NATO members Turkey and Bulgaria, to establish its own Black Sea command, which will have access to NATO capabilities.

It is becoming increasingly clear that, following the Baltic Sea, there is an intention to step up efforts to turn the Black Sea into a "Mare Nostrum" for NATO. Due to Ukrainian attacks on its ships, Russia now exports only a small proportion of its goods via the Black Sea and is even forced to transport grain from southern Russia thousands of kilometres to the Arctic port of Murmansk to be able to export its own grain. So, whilst NATO's ambitions in the Black Sea are growing and a further confrontation with Russia seems inevitable, the Alliance's drive for expansion is clearly directed towards the Caspian Sea.

The Caucasus in the vice-like grip of partnerships

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan significantly strengthened their ties with the military alliance in 2026. NATO's aim is to bind the two states ever more closely to itself through increasingly close partnership programmes and political cooperation. In doing so, NATO is proceeding according to the "boiling frog" principle.

The long-term aim is to resolve the differences between the two states, so that France, on the Armenian side, and Turkey, on the Azerbaijani side, can no longer block a further intensification of relations with NATO by exercising their vetoes. As with the preparations for NATO accession in Eastern Europe, the EU is offering membership, trade concessions and visa facilitation as incentives. The recent media support for protests in Azerbaijan by NATO member Turkey must also be seen as a strategy to make Baku's rapprochement with NATO appear plausible. However, the fact that NATO membership does not protect a country from other NATO members is systematically ignored by Brussels.

On 21 October 2026, *Elchin Amirbayov,* the Azerbaijani President's Special Envoy, met with *Kevin Hamilton,* NATO's Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia, in Brussels. At the meeting, both sides expressed their mutual interest in further deepening their partnership. Rapid developments are on the horizon.

In order not to arouse too much suspicion among third parties in the region, such as Russia and Iran, the approach is cautious yet determined. The picture is now characterised not only by military cooperation with NATO member Turkey, but also by exercises aimed at integration into NATO's military operational structure, such as the one held in Baku on 14 October 2026. If one compares NATO's efforts regarding

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Azerbaijan and Armenia, one is inevitably reminded – despite all the emphasis that NATO membership is not on the agenda – of the run-up to the accession of the Central and Eastern European states. Even without Ukraine, NATO remains on a course of expansion. It almost seems as though all US efforts to reach an agreement with Russia are intended to obscure this fact.

Brzezinski's chessboard and the double standards

Even under *Trump,* US foreign policy continues to follow the playbook set out in *Zbigniew Brzezinski's* "The Grand Chessboard", with the dictum: "Eurasia is thus the chessboard on which the struggle for global primacy continues to be played." This concerns not only NATO's eastward expansion, but also its expansion southwards, albeit for the time being within the framework of ever-closer partnership agreements.

"If the middle space can be drawn increasingly into the expanding orbit of the West (where America preponderates), if the southern region is not subjected to domination by a single player, and if the East is not unified in a manner that prompts the expulsion of America from its offshore bases, America can then be said to prevail", according to Zbigniew Brzeziński's 1997 assessment.

NATO, in any case, is in the process of igniting yet another region with its policy of expansion aimed at defending US global hegemony. Washington remains determined to challenge Russia and China. In doing so, it applies the very double standards that it would have objected to had they been applied to the Western Hemisphere. One thing is certain: once again, others are expected to bear the risk and cost of the US's own expansionist policy. This is the art of US diplomacy, which embodies the West's entire history of colonial "divide and rule".

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