

The CSTO: Military Dimensions of the Russian Reintegration Effort

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Time has shown that while economic matters engender most of the declarative commitments to closer cooperation between post-Soviet regimes, it is security matters that constitute the most sensitive part of the socializing networks that link them together. Russia consistently seeks to exploit the concerns of the quasi-democratic and more or less “enlightened” authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet space, which worry about domestic challenges to their grasp on power (and the external support for such challenges), in order to establish itself as a leading provider of security. Indeed, Moscow has an undeniable advantage regarding the amount of deployable “hard power,” and has on many occasions demonstrated determination and skill in using military force as an ultimate instrument of politics. It is therefore remarkable how little success Russia has achieved in building reliable structures that could legitimize and substantiate its role as a major security provider in the post-Soviet space.

The main multilateral institution embodying this role and addressing the insecurities inherent to the ruling regimes from Belarus to Tajikistan is the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). This chapter examines the evolution of this not-quite-alliance and its regional engagements, focusing on its relevance for the ambitious but far-fetched Eurasian project that President Vladimir Putin aspires to advance.

Struggling to Make Sense

The rapid collapse of the colossal Soviet military machine produced the need to establish an institution that would organize an orderly division of its assets. Consequently, in May 1992, six newly born states—Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyr-

gyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—signed the Collective Security Treaty (known also as the Tashkent Treaty), while three others—Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Georgia—joined the following year.¹ Five years later, when the task of sorting out the possessions and withdrawals had been completed, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Uzbekistan discontinued their participation. In May 2002, the six remaining member-states decided to upgrade the framework of the treaty, creating a full-blown organization called the Collective Security Treaty Organization; Uzbekistan joined the CSTO quasi-alliance in mid-2006, but first suspended and subsequently terminated its membership in 2012-2013.²

On paper, the commitment of member-states to ensuring collective security has always looked solid; in reality, however, Russia has never seriously invested in building the structures required to underpin such a commitment. Nevertheless, the heads of states maintain the ritual of an annual summit, and the Secretary General, Nikolai Bordyuzha, actively tours the capitals and issues affirmative statements.³ Numerous propositions on creating a joint grouping of military/peacekeeping forces have been approved, but not even the most recent decision (in 2009) on establishing “collective rapid reaction forces” is close to being implemented in any meaningful way. The joint staff is an empty bureaucratic shell, and the planning of annual joint exercises, in which randomly selected units demonstrate basic skills, is conducted mostly in the Russian General Staff.⁴ The scope of these exercises is exemplified by the *Nerushimoe Bratstvo* (Indestructible Brotherhood) exercise in October 2013, in which a mobile group was transported in a Mi-8 helicopter in order to intercept a suspect

¹ Useful analysis of that unique dismemberment of a tightly united military organization (Ukraine played a major role while preferring to stay clear of the Tashkent Treaty) can be found in Roy Allison, “Military Forces in the Soviet Successor States,” *Adelphi Paper* 280, London: IISS, October 1993.

² Farkhad Tolipov, “Uzbekistan without the CSTO,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, February 20, 2013, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12652>.

³ More than half of the 26 summits have taken place in Moscow, as will the one scheduled for autumn 2014; the official website contains only the protocols of the meetings after 2008, <http://www.odkb-csto.org/session/>. Nikolay Bordyuzha holds the position since March 2003; before that, he had been Russian ambassador to Denmark, while for three months in early 1999 he served as the Secretary of the Russian Security Council.

⁴ The chief of the Joint Staff General Aleksandr Studenikin confirmed that without increased funding and personnel expansion the staff could not become a functional unit; see Vladimir Muhin, “CSTO goes slow with changes,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, July 1, 2013 (in Russian).

car, after which a few dozen special police troops were deployed to a small village where “extremists” had incited a rebellion.⁵

Much political effort has been expended towards securing international recognition of the CSTO as a regional security organization—and, in particular, towards getting acknowledged by NATO as an equal and legitimate partner. However, even interaction with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has been limited due to Chinese reservations, and NATO has consistently refused to enter into any contacts with the quasi-alliance. The fact of the matter is that Russia clearly places emphasis on cultivating bi-lateral military-security ties with such key allies as Belarus or Armenia, while finding it useless to push them into building any cooperation between them. Thus, the CSTO is merely maintained as an umbrella structure that keeps up the appearance of a collective security system, which has never actually come into existence.

Stumbling over Regional Distortions

The CSTO pretends to be a traditional regional organization, despite encompassing three dissimilar regional security complexes—the East European, the Caucasian, and the Central Asia—and is positioned to play a useful role in neither one. In the turbulent post-Soviet period, these regions have been rich in violent conflicts, but not once has the CSTO been able to make any meaningful contributions. In the Western “theater,” the robust bilateral military alliance between Russia and Belarus does not require any extra appendices. For instance, the symbolic CSTO *Vzaimodeistvie-2013* (Interaction) counter-insurgency drills look quite redundant when compared to the large-scale and bilateral *Zapad-2013*.⁶ The only useful purpose of such networking is to help Belarus emerge from the isolation it has experienced in the last decade, although President Alexander Lukashenko remains resolutely reluctant to send his troops anywhere outside the immediate neighborhood.

⁵ Details of that unimpressive endeavor, in which one soldier died but many medals were awarded, can be found on the CSTO website, http://www.odkb-csto.org/training/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=2825&SECTION_ID=188.

⁶ The Belarusian hosts were represented by an airborne battalion (650 troops), Russia deployed an airborne company (220 troops), and they were also joined by 130 paratroopers from Kazakhstan, 50 from Armenia, two colonels from Kyrgyzstan, and a general from Tajikistan; see Aleksandr Sladkov, “CSTO shows force,” *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, October 4, 2013 (in Russian).

The exposure of the CSTO to the conflicts in the Caucasus is even more awkward, as Armenia is seeking to present this quasi-alliance as its solid security guarantor, while Kazakhstan, which has important energy interests in Azerbaijan and Georgia, draws a line of strict neutrality in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. It is bilateral arrangements that legitimize Russia's military presence in Armenia, but Moscow also cultivates friendly relations on the highest level with Azerbaijan, and certainly would not want to be drawn into the smoldering conflict on the Armenian side. Moreover, at a time when Russia wanted an explicit expression of support from the CSTO, the organization only issued a carefully worded disapproval of Georgia's behavior in August 2008 and firmly refused to recognize the independence or *de facto* secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁷

While Armenia and Belarus constitute special cases in their respective regions, it is in Central Asia where the CSTO is better positioned to provide security and to act as a conduit of Russian efforts in conflict management.⁸ Turkmenistan's strenuously upheld neutrality is not necessarily an impediment to performing such a role, but Uzbekistan's consistently ambivalent attitude towards the CSTO and the termination of its participation in the works of this quasi-alliance most certainly are.⁹ President Islam Karimov has as much reason as any ailing regional leader to worry about the "extremist" revolutionary challenges to his grasp on power, but deep-rooted suspicions of Russia's intentions in the region and jealous disagreements with Kazakhstan's leadership in the regulation of multiple inter-state disputes prevail and shape his preference for keeping full freedom of maneuver.

⁷ The words of Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov about Russia not "pressurizing" the CSTO member-states on the issue of recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were a clear indication that much pressure was put on them albeit to no avail; see "Russia will not press CSTO to recognize Abkhazia, S. Ossetia", *RIA Novosti*, February 1, 2009, <http://en.ria.ru/russia/20090201/119911635.html>. One sharp evaluation of that failure is Alexander Golts, "CSTO is dead," *Moscow times*, August 31, 2010.

⁸ One sound analysis of this role is Stina Torjesen, "Russia as a military great power: The uses of the CSTO and the SCO in Central Asia," pp. 181-192, in Elana Wilson Rowe and Stina Torjesen, *The Multilateral Dimension in Russian Foreign Policy*, London and NY: Routledge, 2009.

⁹ A concise presentation of this position is Farkhod Tolipov, "Uzbekistan without the CSTO," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, February 20, 2013.

Uzbekistan's objections were the key political obstacle within the CSTO that hindered any useful contributions to managing the violent conflict in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan in May-June 2010, after the violent coup in Bishkek in April in which Russia allegedly had a hand.¹⁰ Moscow tried to justify its inability to act on the urgent request from the new Kyrgyz authorities by blaming the lack of provisions for intervening in internal conflicts in the CSTO basic documents, subsequently initiating discussions on amending the documents.¹¹ In fact, however, the Russian leadership had no intention of deploying combat forces into a conflict zone (as it did in Tajikistan in 1992 with the CIS mandate), and that transparent denial to deliver on the commitment to enforce "peace" in crisis situations made a strong impression on the pro-forma allies. Even Belarus was critical of Russia's passivity, and the Central Asian rulers found it opportune to raise their demands for arms supplies and financial aid.¹² Russia has since invested efforts and resources in upgrading its power projection capabilities, but few of these investments have been channeled via the CSTO.

Adjusting to the Eurasian Project

Moscow's determined advancement of the ambitious Eurasian project has since the start of Vladimir Putin's third presidency in 2012 added momentum to, and new tasks for, the transformation of the CSTO. While the main dimension in the enhanced cooperation between Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan is economic (not quite) integration, the list of candidates for inclusion in the Customs Union (and the planned Eurasian Union) are Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, meaning that the composition of the emerging institution is symmetric to the CSTO. Serious disagreements between the three parties of the Customs Union are typically resolved based on the lowest common denominator, which

¹⁰ See Simon Tisdall, "Kyrgyzstan: A Russian revolution?," *The Guardian*, April 8, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/apr/08/kyrgyzstan-vladimir-putin-barack-obama>; Stephen Blank, "Moscow's Fingerprints in Kyrgyzstan's Storm," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, April 14, 2010, <http://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12033>.

¹¹ On the low content of these discussions, see Alexander Golts, "Attempted revival of CSTO," *Ezhednevny zhurnal*, August 24, 2010, <http://ej.ru/?a=note&id=10345>.

¹² On the content of this hard bargaining, see Vladimir Muhin, "Russian military carrot is not that tempting for allies," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, February 5, 2014 (in Russian).

in principle should make it easier for the prospective members to join, but the mutually agreed exclusion of security matters leaves the CSTO without any useful guidelines, so reform of this institution is ineffectual.¹³

The area where the CSTO is supposed to prove its relevance is Central Asia, but the shootouts between the Tajik and Kyrgyz border guards in January and August 2014 served as a reminder that no mechanism for monitoring and regulating inter-state tensions in this region is under construction.¹⁴ It is Uzbekistan that sits in the middle of the interplay of ethnic rivalries and resource disputes, and Karimov is keen to demonstrate that the CSTO has no capacity to manage these conflicts and that Russia is only pursuing its own parochial agenda, making it impossible to trust as an impartial peace-maker. Kazakhstan may be more inclined to engage Russia as a major security provider, but President Nursultan Nazarbayev cherishes his reputation as a statesman of international stature, and so prefers to minimize contacts with the outcast Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and certainly refrains from associating himself with Russian interventions in Georgia and Ukraine.

One important focus of CSTO activities has been to join in efforts to counter the security challenges (including drug trafficking) emanating from Afghanistan, thus gaining acknowledgement from NATO as a valuable partner. It has proven to be far more effectual, nevertheless, for the U.S. and its coalition partners to negotiate directly with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and other states about the arrangements supporting the Northern Distribution Network. Russia has never been successful in using the CSTO to counter Western “encroachments” in Central Asia—this will, however, become redundant during 2014 as the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan will largely be completed. It can also be noted that Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have never shown any enthusiasm in partaking in region-constructing enterprises informed by the proposition that the solution to the protracted disaster in Afghanistan could only be regional and involve all

¹³ On the uneven progress in building the Eurasian Union, see Alexander Gabuev, “Expandable union,” *Kommersant-Vlast*, June 3, 2013; on the lack of common purpose in the CSTO reform, see Vladimir Muhin, “Collective defense of amorphous nature,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, July 12, 2013 (both in Russian).

¹⁴ Arslan Sabyrbekov, “Shootout at the Kyrgyz-Tajik Border,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, August 5, 2014, <http://cacianalyst.org/publications/field-reports/item/13019>. On the inability of the CSTO to moderate these tensions, see Igor Rotar, “Wars between allies,” *Rosbalt*, January 29, 2014, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/exussr/2014/01/29/1226923.html>.

concerned neighbors; they both prefer to stay clear of the troubles to the south of their borders, notwithstanding the plight of the Tajiks and the Uzbeks living there.¹⁵

A major issue for the CSTO in performing any meaningful security role in Central Asia is the ambivalent character of its relations with China, which remains wary of making any firm commitments to providing security in the region, although it has every reason to assume that its interest would not be protected by any other “provider.” Moscow is trying to have it both ways: on the one hand, building ties with China in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO); and on the other, keeping it away by strengthening the CSTO.¹⁶ Beijing is effectively dominating the workings of the SCO but prefers to keep its security agenda limited, instead cultivating a bilateral military partnership with Russia, while monitoring the difficulties for the under-funded Russian bilateral and multilateral military connections in Central Asia.¹⁷ The Ukraine crisis propelled Russia to strengthen ties with China, and the anti-terrorist exercises *Peaceful Mission-2014* held in the Chinese province of Inner Mongolia in August 2014 under the aegis of SCO were intended to show the expanded scope of military cooperation.¹⁸ China also called a meeting of the chiefs of general staffs of the member-states, but was cautious to avoid any geopolitical projections in these joint activities emphasizing instead the cultural program.¹⁹

Deepening dependency upon Chinese carefully calculated support does not square with Russia’s ambitions to become a major player in the complicated Asia-Pacific security intrigues, and they are also not entirely compatible with the Eurasian ambitions. China is certainly aware of the maturing potential of

¹⁵ Updated arguments on the pros and cons of regional solutions can be found in Kristian Berg Harpviken, “Heart or Periphery? Afghanistan’s Complex Neighbourhood Relations,” forthcoming in *War and State building in Afghanistan*, edited by Scott Gates and Kaushik Roy, Bloomsbury Academic (2014).

¹⁶ One useful analysis of this dualism is in Younkyoo Kim and Stephen Blank, “Same bed, different dreams: China’s ‘peaceful rise’ and Sino-Russian rivalry in Central Asia,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2013, vol. 22, no. 83, pp. 773-790.

¹⁷ On the problems in funding these connections, see Vladimir Muhin, “Very expensive collective defense,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, October 23, 2013 (in Russian).

¹⁸ On the Chinese emphasis on counter-terrorist agenda for these exercises, see “Deterrence of three evil forces,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (in Russian), 26 August 2014.

¹⁹ See “Russian troops in the *Peaceful Missions* singing in Chinese,” *RIA-Novosti* (in Russian), August 26, 2014.

conflict in Central Asia, but it has no confidence in Russia's attempts at advancing its interests by regulating these conflicts—and no illusions about the usefulness of the CSTO. One particular consequence of the Ukraine crisis is the reinvigoration of NATO as the member-states rediscover the common purpose in deterring the threat of Russian interventionism, and this new trans-Atlantic determination has indirectly proven that the CSTO cannot qualify as a security alliance.²⁰

Conclusions

The rationale for Putin's Eurasian project have always been dubious despite his strongly reiterated commitment to executing this grand design, and it is impossible—at the moment of this writing on the 61st anniversary of Joseph Stalin's inglorious death—to assess the damage inflicted to Russia's capacity for leadership among the post-Soviet states by the military intervention in the Crimea. Whatever the motivations and particular circumstances for this “intervention of choice,” the experiment with projecting military power for advancing multiple and poorly compatible political goals—some of which amounted to orchestrating a secession—has been unsuccessful and seriously counter-productive. The discourse on protecting “compatriots” is unacceptable for Kazakhstan, and the deployment of armed forces in support of Crimean irredentism is unacceptable for China as a matter of principle, even if it may share Putin's firm stance against revolutions.

The economic disaster and a possible sovereign default in Ukraine are certain to affect the economic interactions inside the Customs Union, but it is the structures of security cooperation that are most severely tested as Russia's allies opt to distance themselves from this “nothing-to-win” crisis. Moscow is hardly interested in bringing these tacit disapprovals together and so would have to rely more on bi-lateral ties at the expense of proceeding with reforming the CSTO. This emphasis will be particularly evident in attempts to modernize the Russian bases from Gyumri in Armenia to Kant in Kyrgyzstan, and resources for

²⁰ Putin stated at the meeting of Russian Security Council: “Russia is fortunately not a member of any alliance.” See the official translation at <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/22714>; a sharp comment on this strategic “loneliness” is Fedor Lukyanov, “Thank God, we are alone,” *Gazeta.ru* (in Russian), July 23, 2014, <http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/column/lukyanov/6141565.shtml>.

such upgrades will be limited; furthermore, Russia will hardly be able to get full control over the Ayni air base in Tajikistan.

Russia's strategic expectations for strengthening its influence in Central Asia are centered on the sharp increase of direct security threats spilling over from Afghanistan after the inevitable (in Russian assessments) collapse of the present regime in the immediate aftermath of the withdrawal of U.S. troops. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and even Turkmenistan (which has had perfectly normal relations with every Afghan ruler and warlord in the last 30 years) indeed have plenty of reasons to worry about these threats, but they have few reasons to believe that Russia would be ready to take effective and expensive measures in helping them to counter those, and the familiar pattern of gaining influence on the cheap has lost all credibility. Kazakhstan is far from happy with the Western disengagement from Central Asia and would prefer Russia to increase its stakes so that it would constitute a counter-balance to the fast and noncommittally growing Chinese presence—though it might have to reconsider the validity of this preference.

The demonstrable and irreducible weakness of the CSTO reveals a deep flaw in the Eurasian integration project as designed and propelled by Vladimir Putin. The authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet states may have much in common and share concerns about public uprisings that may bring them to a sudden end, but they profoundly mistrust one another—and cannot count on Russia as a guarantor of their continuity.