



The Militarization of the Collective Security Treaty Organization

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Russia has reenergized its efforts to evolve the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) from a largely symbolic political organization to a more cohesive militarized security alliance. At the forefront of these efforts is a Russian-led plan to create a new CSTO Rapid Reaction Force (RRF) and a larger Central Asian Military Group. While both initiatives are still in the initial phase of development, the militarization of the CSTO alliance and its transformation into a credible security organization could bolster the Kremlin's ability to limit U.S. and Western influence in Eurasia. It could also allow Russia an enhanced ability to increase its control over former Soviet-controlled states and re-create an alliance similar to the Warsaw Pact.

What is the CSTO?

The Collective Security Treaty Organization is a regional mutual defense alliance that consists of seven member states: Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Originally formed in 1992 under the auspices of the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Collective Security Treaty (CST), the purpose of the CSTO is to promote peace, strengthen international and regional security and stability, and ensure the collective defense of the independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the member states.¹ Led by the Russian Federation, the CSTO has a Collective Security Council, a Council of Defense Ministers, a Council of Foreign Ministers, a Secretariat, and a small rapid deployment force consisting of 4,000 troops.

Since its inception, alliance building within the CSTO has progressed at a glacial rate often running into road blocks as a result of diverging national interests among member states. Following the 11 September 2001 attacks and the subsequent introduction of U.S. forces into Afghanistan and Central Asia, Russian-led efforts to revitalize the security alliance have gained momentum with many Central Asian nations questioning U.S. long-term intentions in the region. The 2003 Iraq War served as another catalyst for change when CSTO Secretary General Nikolayevich Bordyuzha stated "...the Iraqi developments...had forced many political leaders [in Eurasia], whether they liked it or not, to ponder over the security of their states."² Perhaps one of the most pivotal events to solidify Russia's resolve to transform CSTO into a strong military alliance was the 2008 Georgian War. From Russia's perspective, continued U.S. military and political support for Georgia likely played a critical role in Tbilisi's decision to conduct military operations in the restive provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. When taken in concert with Georgia's long-standing desire to become a NATO member, Kremlin leaders have given renewed priority to establish a legitimate defensive alliance to deal with a wide array of security challenges along the country's vast periphery.

Russian Efforts to Militarize the CSTO

Following the August 2008 war with Georgia, Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev called for member nations to increase the military capabilities of the CSTO organization. Those words were put into action in February 2009

1. Charter of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, http://untreaty.un.org/unts/144078_158780/5/9/13289.pdf.

2. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Daily News Bulletin, Interview granted by Nikolai Bordyuzha, Secretary General of the Collective Security Council of the CSTO Member States, to Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obozreniye, Published on September 19, 2003, Under the Heading "You Have to Pay for Security".

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during a CSTO summit in Moscow when the heads of state agreed to establish a new RRF. This force is designed to meet a wide array of Central Asian security challenges and has a mandate to resist military aggression, conduct special operations to eliminate terrorists and extremists, fight against organized crime and drug trafficking, and respond to natural and industrial disasters.³

The new Collective will reportedly consist of up to 16,000 troops, of which 8,000 will be Russian. According to the Russian Defense Ministry, the 98th Guards Airborne Division and the 31st Air Assault Brigade will form the backbone of the CSTO's RRF. The 98th Guards Airborne Division is regarded as one of Russia's elite divisions and participated in the lightning war against Georgia in August 2008.⁴ The 98th Guards Airborne Division also has participated in combat operations in Chechnya from 1999-2000, and select elements also supported multinational peacekeeping operations in Kosovo.

Kazakhstan will provide 4,000 troops, all of which will reportedly come from the Army's elite 37th Air Assault Brigade.⁵ The remaining 4,000 troops will be comprised of military forces from Belarus, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan, which frequently pursues its own agenda within the CSTO alliance, will provide troops on an ad hoc basis to support anti-drug operations or select regional crises that more than likely are considered to threaten Uzbek vital interests in Central Asia.

According to CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha, the creation of the new CSTO RRF could begin in the summer of 2009 and would consist of two components. The army component will be responsible for the resolution of armed and border conflicts. The second component, comprised of special purpose troops, will be used to combat terrorism and drug trafficking. Although the new RRF is not yet fully formed, CSTO officials have stated the new RRF will hold its first joint tactical maneuvers in Kazakhstan during the August-September 2009 timeframe.⁶

In concert with Russian-led efforts to create a CSTO RRF, the Kremlin has also reintroduced a plan to establish a larger Central Asian Military Group using the armed forces of CSTO member states. According to the Russian Foreign Ministry, "this is a purely military structure that is being created in order to ensure security in Central Asia in case of attack from outside."⁷ Although the exact composition and disposition of the new military grouping is unknown, five CSTO member states – Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan – will reportedly provide a majority of the forces, which will be comprised of tank units, artillery formations, and a Caspian-based naval fleet.⁸ This new Central Asian military group will complement, not replace the Russian-Armenian and Russian-Belarusian military groupings that are currently operating in Eurasia.⁹

Why is Russia militarizing the CSTO?

Russia's renewed emphasis to transform the CSTO alliance is likely a result of multiple causal factors highlighted in the country's new National Security Strategy (NSS) released in May 2009. These Russian concerns include the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, drug trafficking, illegal arms sales, and organized crime. While all of these problems may threaten stability in Central Asia, there are two larger strategic issues driving Russia to militarize

3. "Russian-led CSTO Grouping Adds Military Dimension," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 04 February 2009, http://www.rferl.org/Content/Rapid_Reaction_Force_Adds_Military_Dimension_To_CSTO/1379324.html.

4. Ilya Kramnik, "CSTO – Joining Forces in a Crisis," *RIA Novosti*, 02 May 2009, <http://en.rian.ru/analysis/20090205/119991573.html>.

5. Farkhad Sharip, "Kazakhstan Balances NATO and Pro-Russian Alliances," The Jamestown Foundation, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume: 6 Issue: 93, May 14, 2009, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Bsword%5D=8fd5893941d69_d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews%5Bany_of_the_words%5D=CSTO&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=34984&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=803c656638.

6. "Sarkisian, Bordyuzha Discuss Armenia's Role in an Expanded CSTO," *Asbarez.com*, 05 March 2009, <http://www.asbarez.com/2009/03/05/sarkisian-bordyuzha-discuss-armenias-role-in-an-expanded-csto/>.

7. "Russia creates own version of NATO in Central Asia to be prepared for big war," *Pravda*, 29 May 2009 <http://dprogram.net/2009/05/29/msm-russia-creates-its-own-version-of-nato-in-central-asia-to-be-prepared-for-big-war/>.

8. Vladimir Solovyev, "CSTO Said Planning Creation of Central Asia Troop Grouping," *Moscow Kommersant*, 29 May 2009.

9. "Russia creates own version of NATO in Central Asia to be prepared for big war," *Pravda*, 29 May 2009 <http://dprogram.net/2009/05/29/msm-russia-creates-its-own-version-of-nato-in-central-asia-to-be-prepared-for-big-war/>.

the CSTO: NATO's continued expansion eastward and the spread of radical Islamic militancy as a result of the growing instability in Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan.

According to Russia's new NSS, NATO's continued eastward expansion is one of the primary issues that will shape the relationship between Russia and the western alliance.¹⁰ The entry of Albania and Croatia into NATO in April 2009 and the potential for other former Soviet-controlled states, including Ukraine and Georgia, to join the alliance has likely reinforced Russian fears of encirclement by NATO. Additionally, a U.S. initiative to establish a missile defense system in former Soviet-controlled states, now NATO members, has amplified Russian concerns over NATO's long-term intentions in what Moscow regards its historical sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. To Russian leaders, the planned deployment of theater missile defense interceptors to Poland and a radar system in the Czech Republic represent a direct threat to Russian national security and not a defensive missile shield designed to protect the United States and its European allies from an Iranian missile attack.

As outlined in Russia's NSS, Moscow regards the Collective Security Treaty Organization as a key instrument to counter regional challenges as well as political and military threats.¹¹ The establishment of a CSTO RRF and a larger Central Asian military grouping support Russia's goal to create such a force. According to Russian President Medvedev, "as far as fighting potential is concerned, it [the CSTO RRF] needs the same sort of training as the troops of the North Atlantic Alliance,"¹² reinforcing the belief that Russia intends to recreate an alliance similar to the former Warsaw Pact to counterbalance NATO and Western influence in the region.

Second, the Kremlin is concerned over growing instability resulting from the activities of Islamic extremists in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which threatens to spread to Russia and other Central Asian states. Since 2006 the overall security situation in Afghanistan has significantly deteriorated following the reconstitution and reorganization of the Taliban, Al Qaida, and other extremist groups operating throughout the country. Although the United States and NATO's International Security Assistance Force have stepped-up efforts to quell the violence, Russian security officials likely view the short-term security outlook in Afghanistan as bleak since militant groups and criminal elements continue to escalate their attacks against Afghan civilians and coalition forces.

Equally troubling to Russian leaders is the unstable security situation in northwest Pakistan. In early May 2009 Taliban militants broke a peace agreement with the Pakistani government by initiating a series of attacks that allowed them to gain control of the Swat Valley, located 60 miles northwest of Islamabad. After a slow start, the Pakistani Army eventually responded with a counteroffensive that has dislodged the Taliban from key cities inside the valley. While Pakistani military and political leaders celebrate these gains against the Taliban, CSTO members are becoming increasingly concerned that Islamic militants fleeing from northwest Pakistan will relocate to safe zones inside Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Russia.

The movement of radical Islamic elements into Russia and Central Asia states could increase inter-ethnic friction resulting in political and social instability that could threaten vital interests of CSTO members in the region. This is particularly troubling to Kremlin leaders, who are faced with a demographic crisis that continues to spiral downward. The United Nations reports that between 1992 and 2008 Russia's overall population decreased by 12 million to 142 million people as a result of falling birth rates, lower life expectancy, and an unhealthy population.¹³ Despite this decline, during roughly the same time period, a higher than average birth rate and immigration increased the country's ethnic Muslim population by 40 percent to 25 million.¹⁴ If these trends continue, it is possible ethnic Russians will find themselves as a minority in their own country.

10. The National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation through 2020.

11. Lyudmila Alexandrova, "Strong grouping of troops may turn CSTO into NATO analogue," *ITAR-TASS*, 30 May 2009, <http://www.itar-tass.com/eng/level2.html?NewsID=13995683&PageNum=0>.

12. Press Conference following CSTO and EurAsEC Summits, President of Russia Official Web Portal, 04 February 2009, http://president.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2009/02/04/1956_type82914type82915_212504.shtml.

13. "Russia Facing Demographic Challenges," United Nations Development Program, National Human Development Report, Russian Federation 2008, pg. 18.

14. "Muslim Birthrate Worries Russia," *The Washington Times*, 20 November 2006, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2006/nov/20/20061120-115904-9135r/>.

Implications

From one strategic perspective, the establishment of a credible CSTO alliance could foster increased stability in Central Asia. For example, this alliance could provide valuable direct and indirect support to U.S. and NATO operations in Afghanistan where western forces are dealing with a resurgent Taliban and a country that leads the world in opium production. Following the February 2009 CSTO Summit, President Medvedev stated “Russia and other CSTO members are ready for full-fledged, comprehensive cooperation with the United States and other coalition members in fighting terrorism in the region.”¹⁵ While coalition operations in Afghanistan could benefit from Russia’s offer of cooperation and assistance, such support is likely linked to a Kremlin zero-sum game designed to garner concessions from the West on more pressing strategic issues like NATO expansion and missile defense.

While a cohesive CSTO could eventually evolve into a credible security apparatus that adds positive stability to Central Asia, more likely, the transformation of this alliance into a militarized security group will become a tool which Moscow uses to achieve several of its strategic objectives, including increased control over former Soviet-controlled states and halting NATO expansion in Eastern Europe. The degree to which Russia is making strategic inroads via the CSTO was showcased during the February 2009 summit when Kyrgyzstan announced a decision to expel U.S. forces from Manas Airbase. This announcement followed Moscow’s pledge to provide Bishkek with debt forgiveness and a \$2.15 billion aid package to help the Kyrgyzstan’s declining economy.¹⁶ Since 2002, Manas has served as a vital strategic airbase that has provided critical logistical support for U.S. and NATO forces operating in Afghanistan.

Although intensified U.S. diplomatic efforts in late June and an accompanying financial agreement have convinced Bishkek to keep the base open, this may only be temporary since the decision was likely a political maneuver by President Kurmanbek Bakiev to bolster his position in the run-up to presidential elections in July 2009.

A militarized CSTO could also be a mechanism by which Russia is able to more easily shape the geo-strategic environment in Eurasia in line with Russian policies. On 17 April 2009, President Medvedev condemned what he called “NATO’s dangerous decision”¹⁷ to conduct Exercise Cooperative Longbow-Cooperative Lancer 2009, a NATO military exercise in Georgia from 06 May until 01 June. Following Medvedev’s protest, Kazakhstan and Armenia cancelled their participation in the NATO exercise. While Kazakh officials did not provide a specific reason for not participating in the NATO exercise, Armenia Defense Minister Seyran Ohanian cited NATO’s support for Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.¹⁸ Kazakhstan and Armenia’s decision to not support NATO highlight the willingness of CSTO member nations to fall in line with Russian policies. This is particularly troubling as Kazakhstan has been a Partnership for Peace member since 1994, and, despite Russian objections, has frequently seized every available opportunity to improve its ties with NATO.¹⁹ Kremlin leaders adamantly deny any involvement in Bishkek’s February 2009 decision to expel U.S. forces from Manas, or Yerevan and Astana’s decision to not participate in the NATO exercise; however, these events clearly illuminate the degree by which Moscow is able to shape the geo-strategic environment in the region.

CSTO Obstacles are the West’s Opportunities

Although Russian-led efforts have reenergized the CSTO alliance to form a more robust military structure, the organization still has a long way to go before Moscow can effectively use this alliance to curtail western influence in Central Asia or be regarded as an effective counterbalance to NATO. This time affords the United States and its

15. Vladimir Isachenkov, “Russia Vows to Help U.S. Stabilize Afghanistan,” *Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/02/04/russia-vows-to-help-us-st_n_164008.html.

16. “Russian aid to Kyrgyzstan not linked to U.S. airbase closure,” *RIA Novosti*, 02 February 2009, <http://en.rian.ru/world/20090204/119984373.html>.

17. “NATO’s Exercise a ‘Dangerous Move,’” *BBC News*, 17 April 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/8004399.stm>.

18. “Armenia Says NATO Support For Azerbaijan Prompted Pullout,” Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 08 May 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/Armenia_Says_NATO_Support_For_Azerbaijan_Prompted_Pullout/1624565.html.

19. Farkhad Sharip, “Kazakhstan Balances NATO and Pro-Russian Alliances,” The Jamestown Foundation, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume: 6 Issue: 93, May 14, 2009, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Bsword%5D=8fd5893941d69d0b%5Bf378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews%5Bany_of_the_words%5D=CSTO&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=34984&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=803c656638.

NATO allies an opportunity to pursue several options that will help ensure the CSTO remains a more political vice military alliance.

First, the United States along with its European allies has opportunities to exploit the frequently diverging national interests of CSTO member countries. Since the implosion of the Soviet Union, diverging national interests have been the primary obstacles preventing the CST and the CSTO from transforming into a cohesive alliance. A divergence in political and economic interests was brought to the forefront in mid-June when the President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, refused to attend the CSTO summit in Moscow citing what was described as “overt economic discrimination by a CSTO member [Russia] against Belarus.”²⁰ Specifically, Minsk was upset with Moscow for cancelling a \$500 million stabilization loan that Lukashenko claims was suspended because he would not recognize South Ossetia’s and Abkhazia’s declaration of independence from Georgia. Additionally, Belarus has expressed extreme frustration with the Kremlin’s decision to close Russian markets to Belarusian meat and dairy exports. According to Russian officials, Belarus has failed to comply with new technical regulations designed to improve safety and health standards for dairy and meat imports.²¹

In the military realm, CSTO members are already expressing several reservations about Russia’s accelerated efforts to militarize the organization indicating these countries may be wary of Moscow’s long-term intentions for the alliance. During the February 2009 CSTO Summit, Uzbekistan, which recently rejoined the alliance in 2008, refused to commit permanent forces to the CSTO RRF instead opting to provide units on a case-by-case basis. There is also continued CSTO member disagreement over how the RRF will be employed in a time of crisis. In early June during meetings of CSTO Defense Ministers, Armenian military officials demanded increased granularity on the nature of military support the CSTO RRF would provide to Yerevan during a crisis with Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Second, playing upon the diverging national interests of CSTO members, the U.S. and NATO could chose to eschew any formalized relations with the alliance opting instead to develop improved bilateral relationships with individual member states on a wide range of diplomatic, economic, and security issues. Improved bilateral relations could help widen diverging national interests of CSTO members with Russia and prevent the alliance from gaining a high degree of international legitimacy as an effective regional security apparatus. Improved bilateral relations could also undermine the political will of CSTO states to support various operations in the region. Seeing the benefits of Western support, CSTO states could fail to muster and/or sustain the required political will in support of CSTO kinetic and non-kinetic operations in Eurasia, which could be especially detrimental to Russian endeavors to evolve the alliance into a credible security organization. For example, the U.S. and European political leaders might wish to take full advantage of Minsk’s growing discontent with Moscow. Engaging with Belarusian government leaders at various levels could open up avenues that help create favorable conditions that move Belarus closer to the West. Additionally, the United States should maintain a high level of political and economic dialogue with Kyrgyzstan, a country that will likely remain at the center of a geopolitical competition between Russia and the United States in the very near future. Establishing a strong, mutually beneficial relationship with Kyrgyzstan will help the U.S. bolster its position of influence in Central Asia and stave off any future closure of Manas Airbase.

Conclusion

Russia’s renewed efforts to militarize the Collective Security Treaty Organization into a more cohesive security alliance similar to the former Warsaw Pact have gained momentum over the last several years. Moscow’s goal to transform this alliance into an effective security organization on par with NATO could begin to be realized if Russian-led efforts to create a new CSTO RRF and a larger Central Asian Military Group are realized in the coming months. If this occurs, Kremlin leaders will be able to use the CSTO as another tool to increase its control over former Soviet-controlled states and limit Western influence in Eurasia and NATO expansion in Eastern Europe. To prevent the

20. Vladimir Socor, “Belarusian President Boycotts Moscow’s CSTO Summit,” The Jamestown Foundation, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume: 6 Issue: 114, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35126&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=13&cHash=f232a38c80.

21. Ibid.

CSTO's emergence as an effective military alliance, the United States and Europe should accelerate diplomatic and economic efforts that not only improve bilateral relations with individual member states but also exploit diverging national interests within the alliance. Seizing the initiative now will more than likely create strategic conditions that help protect U.S. and European interests in Eurasia while at the same time minimizing Russian attempts to dominate the region.

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