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## 28

# THE COLLECTIVE SECURITY TREATY ORGANIZATION

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The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is a collective security organisation of post-Soviet states in which Russia is the dominant partner. Although it has often appeared to analysts to be more developed and effective on paper than in reality, and is frequently overshadowed by other organisations operating fully or partly in the post-Soviet space such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) or the Eurasian Union, it has proved to be an important, if limited, vehicle for Russian foreign and security policy. The character of its development since the mid-2000s reflects Russian political and military predominance within the organisation, but also the growth of concerns shared by Russia and other member states about the twin threats to regional and regime security posed by the situation in Afghanistan and the normatively framed challenges from the West, above all the US. At the same time, the problems surrounding its development and its limited membership reflect the limits of Russian material and ideational capabilities when faced with the region's complex dynamics and the concerns about the threats posed by Russian domination. In this way, the CSTO can be seen as an interesting reflection of the capacity and limits of Russian regional hegemony.

## Origins and development

The origins of the CSTO lie in the multilateral arrangements developed to manage the collapse of the Soviet Union – something reflected in a number of its key features and in the challenges it faces. The Collective Security Treaty (CST), signed in May 1992, aimed to retain a significant degree of military cooperation between a majority of the states of the Former Soviet Union (excluding the Baltic states), once initial attempts to establish a unified armed forces had failed. The Treaty committed the signatory states to security policy coordination, prohibited them from joining alliances hostile to other signatories, and declared that an attack on one signatory would be considered an attack on all (Collective Security Treaty Organisation, 2010a). The vague character of many of the Treaty's statements, and the scope this offered for potential intervention in signatory states' affairs by other signatories, above all Russia, raised questions about the intentions behind the Treaty and generated opposition to it in some post-Soviet states, including Ukraine (Deyermond, 2008: 43).

As with the broader Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) framework of which it was a part, the CST was, at best, extremely limited in its functioning during the 1990s.

The organisations of the CIS generated an extensive framework of institutions and treaties, but these were widely regarded as virtual structures, not meaningfully connected to actual bilateral or multilateral interactions among member states. With the exception of the deployment of multinational peacekeeping forces in response to the conflict in Tajikistan, the CST appeared to provide little by way of collective security or foreign policy coordination. On the tenth anniversary of the CST, in May 2002, the signatories agreed to expand the scope of the CST, creating the CSTO. As Saat (2005: 4) notes, this development can be understood as a response by Russia to both the security threats posed by the post-2001 situation in Afghanistan and to the presence of the US in Central Asia as part of the 'Global War on Terror'.

Unlike the CST, which included Georgia and Azerbaijan for several years, the membership of the CSTO has never expanded beyond Russia, the Central Asian states, and Russia's two closest allies in the FSU outside Central Asia: Armenia and Belarus. Thus, although the CSTO is divided into three regions – European, Caucasus, and Central Asia, a structure inherited from the CST – the organisation is dominated by the interaction between Russia and the Central Asian states. Even within Central Asia, however, membership is limited to three of the region's five states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. In keeping with its policy of neutrality, Turkmenistan has never joined the CSTO, or the CST before it. Uzbekistan, which was a signatory to the CST, did not initially join the CSTO, but became a member in 2006 after concerns about the potential threats to regime stability raised by both the 'colour revolutions' and Western responses to the 2005 Andijan massacre encouraged the Karimov government to seek a closer relationship with the region's other authoritarian governments. As widely noted, however (for example, Aris, 2010; Baev, 2014: 43; De Haas, 2016a: 206), Uzbekistan's membership of the CSTO was rendered problematic by its government's persistent concerns about Russian military and political domination. Uzbekistan's decision to withdraw from the CSTO in 2012 removed a potential counterweight to Russian dominance of the organisation and a source of institutional friction, but, as discussed later, this has created additional problems.

The structure of the CSTO has expanded since its creation, reflecting the emerging military and political priorities of the member states. The CSTO is headed by the Collective Security Council, comprising the heads of the member states, which the Charter specifies as the body responsible for setting the overall direction of the CSTO; below it are the Council of Defence Ministers, the Council of Foreign Ministers, and the Committee of CSTO Defence Council Secretaries (Collective Security Treaty Organisation, 2010b). Parallel to the ministerial councils, the CSTO Secretary-General heads the bureaucracy of the CSTO, the Secretariat and, since 2004, a CSTO Joint Staff. From its inception, the CSTO has had a Collective Rapid Deployment Force, which was intended to address the twin threats of terrorism and external aggression.

The institutional development of the CSTO accelerated in the second half of the 2000s, seemingly in response to both the nature of emerging security threats, particularly in the Central Asian region in the context of the conflict in Afghanistan, and concerns about US-led organisational and normative expansion into the post-Soviet space. As Weitz (2014: 3) suggests, it has evolved from its origins as a traditional collective defence organisation intended to facilitate a multinational force fighting a conventional war, into an organisation that aims to address a range of traditional and non-traditional threats including terrorism, drug- and human trafficking, peacekeeping, and emergency response. Several years into this evolution, then-CSTO Secretary-General Nikolai Bordyuzha stated that the CSTO's objectives were first, 'joint action by member states to reinforce stability'; second, to combat non-traditional security threats; and finally, to address traditional security threats such as interstate conflict or an attack on a member state (Bordyuzha, 2011). An additional, implicit, objective evident in the CSTO's development

has appeared to be the countering of US-led Western influence through institutional mirroring or duplication. In 2007, the CSTO announced that it was creating a Parliamentary Assembly; an Anti-Terrorist Committee; anti-terrorist forces; and a Peacekeeping Force (Jackson, 2009). This, it has been suggested, was an attempt 'to at least symbolically occupy the position among its member states which NATO has assumed in the 1990s through its Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme' (Marat and Murzakulova, 2007). In 2009, most members of the CSTO agreed to the creation of a Rapid Reaction Force, although Belarus and Uzbekistan declined to participate. The CSTO has also agreed on the creation of a collective Air Defence System and, in 2013, Collective Aviation Forces; however, these have yet to be developed, and in that respect, they are symptomatic of a wider problem evident across most of the CSTO's existence: much of the CSTO's political coordination and structural development has been understood to exist only on paper. The creation of the Rapid Reaction Force was an attempt to address the problem that, as then-President Medvedev observed of the Collective Rapid Deployment Forces (playing on their name), 'of course they do deploy fast but they have never been deployed by anyone anywhere as yet. And these forces' value still exists on paper only' (Molchanov, 2015: 37).

The desire to give greater substance to the CSTO since the mid-2000s has been evident from the increase in frequency of military exercises conducted by CSTO forces. De Haas notes that military exercises were held annually in the period 2003–05, but increased to two or three times a year in most years during the period 2006–11, and rose to four to six per year in 2012–15 (2016b: 392). These have included the annual 'Rubezh' ('Frontier') counter-terrorism exercises, counter-narcotics, and the 'Unbreakable Brotherhood' peacekeeping exercises. Not surprisingly, the content of these exercises has reflected the current security preoccupations of member states: a counter-Islamic State (IS) exercise was held in Moscow in March 2015 and an anti-IS joint intelligence and reconnaissance exercise took place in Tajikistan in April 2016. In August 2014 the annual 'Interaction' exercise focused on cybersecurity and on information and psychological warfare (De Haas, 2016b: 399). The largest of the exercises, 'Tsentr' ('Centre'), held on several occasions since 2008, are conventional warfare exercises; in 2015, the 'Tsentr' exercise involved 95,000 troops and all branches of the armed forces (President of Russia, 2015).

The developing structure of the CSTO and the changing character of its military exercises have represented a response to internal, as well as external, challenges. Most significant of these was the violence in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, when the CSTO failed to provide assistance to the provisional government, despite the government's requests for support. In the aftermath of this failure, most member states agreed to expand the CSTO's scope to allow for interventions in member states' internal affairs, if those states were threatened by destabilising forces.

The remit of the CSTO has continued to develop in the period since this decision, as evidenced by the CSTO's most significant recent policy document, the Collective Security Strategy to 2025, released in October 2016. The strategy provides an indication of the extent to which member states' (perhaps most importantly Russia's) security concerns have expanded beyond the limits of conventional warfare and peacekeeping. In addition to the longer-standing concerns evident in the CSTO charter and later documents, prominent threats to member states identified in the strategy include attempts to destabilise a state's constitutional order; the use of media and the internet to achieve a 'destructive ideological and psychological' impact on member states' populations; the use of 'colour revolution' and hybrid war technologies; and the application of double standards by external states on matters of international law (The Collective Security Treaty Organisation, 2016). Thus, over the course of its fifteen-year existence, the CSTO has moved away from its early focus on more conventional military concerns, to a preoccupation with the challenges posed by new technologies and the normative conflict with the US and its European allies.

## The CSTO literature

The CSTO has attracted comparatively little analytical attention compared with many other aspects of Russian foreign policy, perhaps because so much analysis since the late 2000s has been concentrated on Russia's relationship with the US, China, and Europe, though it has also received less attention than some other organisations wholly or partly located in the post-Soviet space, notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Eurasian Union.

Discussions of the CSTO have often been focused on attempting to clarify the structures, policies, and activities of what is generally agreed by Western analysts to be an opaque organisation (for example, Saat, 2005; De Haas, 2016b). Beyond this, analysis of the CSTO has often focused on two main aspects: its ineffectiveness, and the extent to which it acts as a vehicle for Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet space. As Kropatcheva (2016: 1527) notes, analysis by non-Russian scholars generally represents the CSTO as an instrument, successful or otherwise, of Russian regional domination, while Russian views are more diverse. Nikitina, for example, takes issue with what she regards as the consensus Western view, suggesting instead that 'Russia is less willing to be a regional security provider than outside observers usually assume', in part because 'Moscow does not want to continue to pay for its allies' loyalty' (Nikitina, 2012: 47). Many analysts, notably Allison (2004, 2008), Matveeva (2013), Pavel Baev (2014), Molchanov (2015), and Kropatcheva (2016) have questioned the capacities and effectiveness of the organisation in various aspects of its operation, although De Haas has suggested that its more recent structural developments and increase in military exercises indicate that 'the CSTO has become a professional security organisation' that 'forms a valuable military alliance for Central Asia' (De Haas, 2017: 12–13).

Another area of interest for some analysts has been the way in which the CSTO, together with other regional organisations, has provided normative solidarity, and thus a form of collective norm security for member states, which in turn has enhanced regime stability in a period when democracy-related challenges from the US and Western institutions appeared to threaten it. Thus, Roy Allison notes that 'regional coordination, cast in the grandiose language of regional integration . . . creates a basis for political solidarity between state leaders and their protection against or resistance to a perceived interventionist agenda of democracy-promotion by Western states' (Allison, 2008: 188).

### The role of the CSTO in Russian foreign policy

Since its creation, the CSTO has occupied a significant, if limited, position in relation to wider Russian foreign policy. Successive Russian foreign policy concepts have identified the CSTO as central to regional security and as part of a broader framework of relations with the other states of the post-Soviet space. The 2016 Russian Foreign Policy Concept, like the previous Concept of 2013, identifies the CSTO as 'a key instrument to maintain stability and ensure security in the Organization's area of responsibility' and states that:

Russia seeks to facilitate the development of the CSTO into a prominent multifunctional international organization capable of overcoming challenges and threats today's world is facing amid the growing pressure from various global and regional factors within the CSTO's area of responsibility and in the adjoining regions.

*(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016a)*

As this suggests, the CSTO appears to have both regional and wider significance for Russian foreign and security policy. At the regional level, most obviously, the CSTO is intended to act as a

mechanism for addressing the significant security challenges that the Central Asian region poses for Russia. In particular, the complex range of threats arising from the situation in Afghanistan, notably those relating to terrorism, require cooperation with the states in Central Asia. As Kropatcheva suggests, cooperation on Afghanistan via the CSTO is particularly important given that 'Russia is not willing to take full responsibility for Afghanistan-related security problems [but] is interested in cost-/burden-sharing within the CSTO', (Kropatcheva, 2016: 1544).

Beyond this specific issue, the CSTO has clear importance for Russian security policy because it facilitates power projection and provides institutional legitimacy for the continued stationing of Russian forces in Central Asia – for example at the Kant base in Kyrgyzstan, where Russian troops form part of the Rapid Reaction Force. As a result of the CSTO, large areas of the post-Soviet space remain linked together through structures of security cooperation, while members are restricted by CSTO agreements in their ability to form security relationships with non-member states; this provides a greater degree of protection for Russian strategic interests in the region than it would otherwise be able to achieve without the umbrella of the CSTO.

This function of the CSTO is only really meaningful in relation to the Central Asian region, since the other two regions each include only one non-Russian member, and Russia's bilateral security relationships with Belarus and Armenia do not depend on the CSTO structure in any significant way. Nevertheless, the inclusion of these other two states, and therefore regions, in the CSTO is important for Russian foreign policy because it extends the scope of the organisation beyond a Central Asian sub-regional institution, creating an institution of wider international significance.

Globally, the CSTO performs a limited role in relation to other multilateral organisations, and thus its capacity to act as an international support for Russian power is restricted. For Russia's relationship to other powerful states, the role of the CSTO is arguably primarily preventive. In the case of Russia's complex and delicate relationship with China in Central Asia, the CSTO acts as a check on the possible further development of the SCO into security-related areas (Kacmarski, 2007). For more than decade the CSTO also appears to have performed a similar function in relation to the US. As Pop suggests, for instance, the creation of the Rapid Reaction Force can be understood as a mechanism to check NATO involvement in Central Asia during the first decade of the twenty-first century, underlining the greater reliability of Russia as a security partner for the region's states (Pop, 2009: 289). A second critical function relates to CSTO policy and, perhaps most importantly, the shared discourse of CSTO members on issues of stability and non-interference in states' internal affairs (see, for example, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016b), which acts, as already noted, as a counter to perceived attempts at norm-driven intrusion, particularly on the part of the US.

### **The role of Russia in the CSTO**

Since its creation, Russia has remained the unquestionably dominant state in the CSTO, politically, militarily, and in relation to the organisation's composition. To a significant extent, the CSTO is thus an expression of and a vehicle for the maintenance of Russian military hegemony in the post-Soviet space. The problems evident in the development of the CSTO, however, also indicate the limits of that hegemony.

At a practical level, Russian dominance within the CSTO has been inevitable given the huge disparity between the military capabilities of the Russian Federation and those of the other member states. Russian troops dominate the Rapid Reaction Force and the Peacekeeping Force; of the other member states, only Kazakhstan provides a numerically significant component of the Peacekeeping Force (De Haas, 2016b: 391). This dominance is equally evident

within the CSTO's bureaucracy. In the period after its inception, for example, 50 per cent of the Joint Staff posts were occupied by Russian officers (Frost, 2009: 86). Most obviously, the dominance of Russia within the structures of the CSTO was both reflected and enhanced by the thirteen-year tenure of Nikolai Bordyuzha as CSTO Secretary-General, who occupied the post until the end of 2016 (after a delay of several months, Yuri Khatchaturov of Armenia was appointed as his successor in April 2017). Russian dominance is also sustained through the provision of goods to other member states. Russian arms are made available to CSTO members at reduced cost; for the poorer member states in particular, this has been a significant benefit. Perhaps more important over the long term is the training of CSTO officers in Russian military academies – as Frost notes, a Russian military education makes a Russian-inflected perspective on CSTO matters more likely among Central Asian officers (Frost, 2009: 86).

As this may suggest, the Russian troop presence and Russian military dominance of the CSTO is not necessarily unwelcome to the other member states – though in the case of some (notably Uzbekistan), it clearly has been so. Armenia and Belarus both have long-established, close security relations with Russia, while the two weakest states in Central Asia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, have a significant degree of energy and security dependence on Russia given the potential conflicts with other states in the region. In this respect, then, it can be argued that Russian dominance of CSTO bureaucracy and military structures reflects the classic understanding of hegemony in International Relations theory: Russia dominates materially and ideationally, but this domination provides collective goods to other states, in the form of security provision and a stabilising presence in the context of sub-regional tensions between Central Asian members.

If Russia is unquestionably the dominant state within the CSTO, it is nevertheless the case that the organisation's priorities reflect the concerns of member states more broadly. This is clear, for example, in the emphasis placed on the CSTO's counterterrorism and counter-narcotics functions. Terrorism and drug trafficking are very significant problems for the Central Asian member states as well as for Russia, particularly because of the proximity of Afghanistan and the difficulty in effectively securing borders to counter these threats. The prominence of both issues within the CSTO is reflected in policy documents, notably the 2016 Collective Security Strategy, which details the organisation's commitments to coordinated activity on both issues. It is also evident from the significant number of CSTO military exercises concerned with counterterrorism and counter-narcotics – as Hoffmann (2014) notes – that the majority of the CSTO's military exercises have addressed one of these two threats. Russian governmental statements on security policy priorities do not generally give the same degree of prominence to drug trafficking issues as they receive in the CSTO, suggesting that this is one area in which the organisation's agenda does not privilege Russian priorities over those of other members. It also indicates the extent to which, for most of its existence, the focus of the CSTO has reflected Central Asian security concerns and the security concerns of Russia in Central Asia rather than, for example, those of Belarus.

Other issues on the CSTO agenda do, however, reflect the security priorities of the membership as a whole. Arguably the most significant of these is the resistance to possible norm-driven external intrusion into member states. If the CSTO was, at least in part, a response to the presence in Central Asia as part of the 'Global War on Terror', both the US's adoption of a discourse of assertive democracy promotion under George W. Bush and the 'colour revolutions' which occurred in the same period encouraged member states to use the CSTO as a mechanism for resisting what they regarded as normatively framed threats to their security. Although the Russian government has, since the late 2000s, been the most vocal and prominent critic of what it has regarded as attempts to utilise the language of democracy promotion and human rights

to advance national interests in the post-Soviet space, other CSTO member states have shown similar concerns, and this aspect of the CSTO's policy direction acts as an ideational glue binding members more closely together.

### **The limits of Russian power and influence in the CSTO**

It is also clear that even if the CSTO demonstrates the scale of Russian capabilities and influence in relation to the other member states, it also shows their limits. This has been evident in several issues confronting the CSTO, notably the issues of Uzbek membership, the non-response to the violence in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, and the position of other member states on Russia's war in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.

As noted earlier, Uzbekistan is the only state to have joined and then left the CSTO. Both as a member and afterwards, its position has demonstrated a suspicion of Russian power and intentions, as well as a sub-regional rivalry with Kazakhstan. The government of Uzbekistan has resisted Russian political and military dominance of Central Asia throughout the post-Soviet period, seemingly keen to position itself as an alternative power centre in the region (Deyermond, 2009), and this has been reflected in its approach to the CSTO. Uzbekistan was one of two states not to support the creation of the Rapid Reaction Forces, opposing their potential use for resolving internal conflicts in member states (Tolipov, 2009) and had more generally opposed participation in combined military forces under Russian control, as well as participation in (Russian-led) CSTO military exercises (Aris, 2010). The Uzbek government has made it clear that it will not permit any foreign basing on its territory (De Haas, 2016a: 223), following the expulsion of US troops in the mid-2000s, and will also consistently oppose any CSTO policy or action that would involve the intervention in a member state's internal affairs – it was, for example, apparently instrumental in blocking any CSTO intervention in the 2010 crisis in Kyrgyzstan (Baev, 2014: 44). Both inside the CSTO and outside it, Uzbekistan has remained an obstacle to the CSTO's coherence and capacity to operate effectively as a collective security provider. The departure of Uzbekistan revived the problem previously identified by Roy Allison, that without it the CSTO is 'hollowed out in Central Asia' (Allison, 2008: 193), while Pavel Baev argued in 2014 that then-President Karimov was playing a spoiler role in relation to the CSTO, 'keen to demonstrate that the CSTO has no capacity to manage [Central Asia] conflicts and that Russia is only pursuing its own parochial agenda, making it impossible to trust as an impartial peace-maker' (Baev, 2014: 45). To the extent that the CSTO matters to Russian foreign and security in relation to Central Asia, the position of Uzbekistan remains a problem.

A different type of problem for Russia's CSTO policy was evident in the context of the Kyrgyzstan crisis of 2010. If the CSTO is intended by the Russian government to operate as an instrument of power projection both within and outside the region, any significant failure of the CSTO appears to reflect negatively on Russian capacities. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, the failure of the CSTO to intervene, despite the request of the Kyrgyz government to do so, raises questions about the effectiveness and purpose of the CSTO as a collective security organisation. Analysts have suggested various reasons for the failure of the CSTO to intervene, including opposition by Uzbekistan; the lack of strategic significance for Russia (Kropatcheva, 2016); dislike of the character of the new Kyrgyz government and the means by which it had come to power; and Russia's fear of international repercussions after the negative effects of the war in Georgia (Matveeva, 2013: 487). Whatever the reason, the consequence was that when confronted with its first significant challenge, the region's collective security organisation failed to act meaningfully to assist a member state in restoring order, despite the request of that state to



do so. This has inevitably reflected on the credibility of both the CSTO and Russia as its leading member. As Matveeva argues:

Conceived as a regional response to NATO, active in the post-Soviet periphery, [the] CSTO never proved itself in action, adding ammunition to the discourse that the organisation lacks the capacity to intervene properly in the first instance. [The] crisis in Kyrgyzstan may have been its golden opportunity, but instead showed it as an emperor with no clothes.

(Matveeva, 2013: 489)

If the crisis in Kyrgyzstan exposed the limits of Russia's capacity or willingness to act as a security provider, through the CSTO, for other member states, the crises in Georgia and Ukraine demonstrated the limits of Russia's political influence. In both cases, the Russian government appears to have unsuccessfully sought an endorsement of its actions from other CSTO members, with little success; instead, CSTO members have provided a minimum of carefully worded support while withholding significant public agreement. Thus, the other member states agreed to condemn Georgian aggression in 2008, and offered limited support for Russian actions, but did not agree to recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states (in both cases, recognised by Russia). As Kropatcheva argues, 'the CSTO's half-hearted support [on Georgia] has not strengthened Russia's position internationally. On the contrary, it has revealed the weakness of Russia's position within the CSTO itself' (Kropatcheva, 2016: 1538).

Although the CSTO has expanded significantly in its policy scope, structure, and activities since its creation, it appears to remain an organisation with limited capacity either to act or to provide a clear, sustained degree of meaningful foreign policy coordination of the kind envisaged in its founding documents. Both its growth and its weakness are, to a significant degree, the consequence of Russian domination of the organisation but also of the limits of Russian capabilities and Russian interests in relation to it. While the CSTO will doubtless continue to evolve in its structure and policy, its emergence as a genuinely effective collective security organisation would depend on a much greater degree of commitment to that goal by Russia and by the other member states who appear to regard the bilateral relationship with Russia as more significant than the multilateral one. The CSTO thus seems likely to remain a politically useful but practically limited instrument of Russian regional power.

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