The Collective Security Treaty Organization: Past Struggles and Future Prospects

By Richard Weitz, Washington

Abstract
The CSTO has been expanding its defense capabilities, legal mandate, and range of missions in recent years, and has emerged as the main regional defense alliance in Eurasia. Nonetheless, the continuing war in Afghanistan, the contested democratic legitimacy of CSTO member states, Russia’s newly assertive stance in Ukraine and Moscow’s focus on building a Eurasian Union that might take on its own military dimension mean that the CSTO faces major challenges in coming years.

Nikolai Bordyuzha, who has been Secretary General of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) since April 2003, was one of the headline speakers at the May 23 International Security Conference in Moscow, organized by the Russian Ministry of Defense. General Bordyuzha—whose impressive resume includes service in the Soviet KGB, head of the presidential administration, Russian National Security Advisor, and former Russian ambassador to Denmark—joined with Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov in denouncing the West’s alleged overthrow of the government of Ukraine, NATO’s military buildup during the current crisis, and Washington’s supposed campaign to promote social revolutions throughout the Middle East. In his view, the United States was employing sanctions, other economic threats, hiring mercenaries, and manipulating the cyber domain to weaken Russia and other competing centers of power. In the face of such an onslaught, Bordyuzha said that the CSTO would concentrate on preventing and managing conflicts in its Eurasian region of responsibility, including by addressing border tensions, transnational terrorism, and competition for water and energy resources.

The previous month Bordyuzha had announced that the CSTO had suspended contacts with NATO because of the Ukraine crisis and NATO’s alleged efforts to “blackmail” Russia and all its CSTO allies. This move was largely an empty gesture, since NATO had studiously avoided dealing with the CSTO since its founding more than a decade ago. U.S. and other NATO officials have been reluctant to formalize relations with the CSTO for fear of reinforcing Moscow’s preeminence in Central Asia. Western security experts have generally considered the organization as a hollow front organization that Moscow employs as an instrument to influence its neighbors’ defense policies. It is true that the CSTO, led by a Russian general and with a staff based in Moscow, has served as a key element in Russia’s drive to strengthen Moscow’s influence in the former Soviet Union. While Belarus and Armenia provide CSTO with security interests in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, the organization’s primary regional focus has been Central Asia. There the CSTO has bolstered Moscow’s influence by helping justify Russia’s bases in the region, providing incentives for Central Asian militaries to cooperate with Russia, and potentially providing legal justification for Russian military interventions. But the other member governments, excluded from NATO or any other powerful defense alliance, have seen benefits in participating in the CSTO. Many of its member governments fear that the Arab Spring will spread north and threaten their own rule, while NATO’s declining presence in Afghanistan is leading Central Asian states to rely more on Moscow for their security. Of course, the specific motives for membership differ for each state. Whereas Belarus fears Western-backed efforts to replace its authoritarian government, Armenia sees the CSTO as providing a means to strengthen its military potential against rival Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, the Central Asian member governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan feel threatened by narcotics trafficking and terrorist groups seeking to replace the region’s secular governments with overtly Islamist structures.

Missions and Capabilities
The CSTO’s originally declared focus was countering external military aggression against member countries, but its governments have since been authorizing the CSTO’s use for a wider range of possible missions. The organization’s publically stated objectives are maintaining the national and collective security of its members, promoting cooperation among them in the political-military sphere, coordinating their foreign policies, establishing collective mechanisms for integrating members’ capabilities, and fighting modern transnational threats such as international terrorism, drug trafficking, illegal migration, organized crime, and misuse of information technologies. CSTO members have committed to inform one another of any defense ties with non-members, especially decisions to buy weapons from these states or host foreign military bases on their soil. Con-
versely, Russian officials have used the CSTO to legitimize their own military presence in other former Soviet republics. For example, they justified Russia’s military facilities in Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic as contributing to CSTO multinational missions.

The CSTO is engaged in both offensive and defensive information operations. When they meet, CSTO leaders typically issue joint statements on various international security issues such as missile defense, Iran, and Syria. The intent is to amplify the impact of their individual views by speaking with a collective voice, trying to demonstrate widespread support for their policies. These joint declarations almost always support Moscow’s position but can also back other members’ policies. For example, at Armenia’s initiative, in April 2014, the CSTO issued a collective statement condemning the occupation of the Syrian town of Kessab, populated by ethnic Armenians, by an al-Qaeda linked extremist group. The CSTO member governments, which exercise various forms of domestic media censorship, have expressed concern about how terrorists and other regime opponents exploit the Internet to recruit followers and organize subversive activities. Following Moscow’s lead, the CSTO governments have sought to use the organization to strengthen their cyber defenses.

In terms of military capabilities, the CSTO was designed to mobilize large multinational coalitions in wartime under joint command. In addition to its original regional collective-defense groups, the CSTO has developed joint peacekeeping and rapid reaction forces consisting mostly of elite military units to counter terrorism, support intra-CSTO conflict-mediation, and, thanks to changes in the CSTO Charter since the 2010 ethnic unrest in Kyrgyzstan between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, prevent social upheavals in member countries. The Collective Rapid Reaction Force (KSOR) is designed to conduct lower-intensity operations, including peacekeeping, counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, emergency response, and combating drug trafficking and other transnational criminal activity. The KSOR’s troops are kept in a higher state of readiness and, if deployed, would fall under multinational command. Unlike CSTO’s three large multinational groups, the KSOR engages in regular exercises, especially in Central Asia, where the main transnational threats are concentrated. It includes special purpose forces as well as conventional combat troops. The Russian Ministry has already announced that it will hold another of the “Enduring Brotherhood” (“Nerushimoe Bratstvo”) series of drills with its CSTO partners later this year, as well as a joint CSTO-India exercise. As a carrot and as a means of keeping its allies militarily dependent, the Russian government provides CSTO personnel with subsidized education and training opportunities at Russian military institutions and allows CSTO allies to purchase Russian weapons at the same prices charged the Russian armed forces. The CSTO supports cooperation among members’ defense industries, many of which are tightly connected as part of the integrated Soviet military-industrial complex. Plans for a joint CSTO Collective Air Force and a CSTO Air Defense and Missile Defense System also exist.

Challenges

Since its creation, CSTO officials, strongly supported by the Russian government, have tried to receive official recognition by NATO as an equivalent regional alliance. The CSTO had made numerous proposals to establish formal cooperative programs with NATO to manage regional security issues, especially Afghanistan. These have focused on joint counter-narcotics efforts. Perceiving the CSTO to be a Moscow-dominated institution and a mechanism to reinforce Russian hegemony in Central Asia, NATO collectively, and its individual members, has declined to engage with the CSTO on an organization-to-organization basis, and instead worked with CSTO members individually. Russia has responded by constraining NATO activities in Central Asia, including by encouraging Kyrgyzstan to end the U.S. military base at Manas and by blocking a U.S. Central Asian Counternarcotics Initiative to build a network of U.S.-supported anti-drug centers and task forces in Central Asia. Russia’s occupation and annexation of Crimea has led to a sharp deterioration in relations between NATO and CSTO. NATO has called for Russia to withdraw from Crimea, while the CSTO leadership has accused NATO of violating its agreements with Russia by deploying forces to Eastern Europe. Having declined to join the other international forces undertaking a direct combat role in Afghanistan in defense of its government against the Taliban insurgency, the CSTO’s main activity regarding that country has been to contain the drugs, terrorists, small arms and light weapons, and other maladies emanating from its soil.

CSTO governments have more recently expressed concern about the “social revolutions” in the Middle East and that civil war in Syria was helping recruit, train, and empower scores of Muslims militants, including some from Russia and Central Asia. At the September 2013 CSTO heads-of-state summit in Sochi, Putin warned CSTO governments that the Islamist extremists fighting in Syria could soon be fighting them. The communique issued at the summit also warned that any foreign (Western) military intervention in Syria would be “unacceptable” and illegal unless it had the approval of the UN Security Council, where Moscow has the power to veto resolutions. Focusing on foreign military threats...
comes naturally to CSTO members, since the organization has found it difficult to help when its members experience internal threats. Even though the new Kyrgyz government appealed to the CSTO for assistance to halt the summer 2010 ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan, the CSTO leaders decided against sending in their forces to quell the violence, claiming the CSTO lacked a legal basis for doing so. Although the organization has since acquired a broader legal mandate, its governments are generally uncomfortable about having foreign countries, especially Russian, interfere militarily in their internal affairs, as demonstrated by their unease at the Russian military interventions against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.

Disputes among CSTO members have continually weakened the organization’s coherence. Border conflicts prevail in the Ferghana Valley, an ethnically-diverse and densely-populated agricultural region that since the Soviet Union’s collapse has been artificially divided between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The recent Tajik-Kyrgyz border skirmishing has made Central Asia more vulnerable to narcoterrorism. Kyrgyzstan’s parliament has questioned the CSTO’s viability and usefulness due to its failure to address the confrontation. Nevertheless, the issue of border conflicts among member states falls outside the CSTO’s mandate. The organization can mediate among members, but requires the explicit consent of the parties in conflict. The Tajik-Kyrgyz conflict has subsided for now, with both sides withdrawing armed units from their border and a joint-commission addressing border demarcation with CSTO assistance. Uzbekistan’s withdrawal from the CSTO in 2010 has also made it easier for Kazakhstan, a periodic rival with Tashkent for regional primacy, to collaborate with Moscow in promoting regional security integration. Russian policy makers may reason that these internal conflicts helpfully allow Moscow to exploit regional tensions to advance its own interests, since many of the parties want Russian support against their regional rivals. Conversely, the failure of CSTO to always speak with a united voice on Russia’s behalf is presumably less welcome in Moscow. The members have failed to endorse the results of Russia’s military conquests in 2008 against Georgia; only Belarus has followed Moscow in recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Armenia has also complained about the reluctance of the CSTO to side with Yerevan in its territorial dispute with Azerbaijan. Russia’s recent occupation and subsequent annexation of Crimea, justified in part on historical and ethnic ties, has unsettled many people in the other CSTO member states. Russia and the CSTO secretariat have had to reassure members that they would not have to send troops to fight on Russia’s behalf in Ukraine.

NATO’s declining presence in Afghanistan is creating a vacuum that the CSTO is being pressured to fill. The conflict with Ukraine is also presenting new security challenges for its members. Moscow’s drive to establish a strong Eurasian Union further complicates the picture. Since the Union Treaty was only recently signed and the organization will not begin operating until next year, the precise membership and functions of the Eurasian Union remain unclear. Nevertheless, the new structure might include all the CSTO members and have some defense functions, making the CSTO a likely candidate for absorption in the same way that the European Union, deciding it needed an organic Common Security and Defence Policy, integrated the functions of the previously independent Western European Union a few years ago.

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