The World HandCOV'd: CSTO: in search of raisons d'être

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Key takeaways

- Without a clear mission, the CSTO tends to declare that it prepares itself to deal with all sorts of security issues, including the Covid-19 pandemic.
- From a practical standpoint, the CSTO's achievements remain modest.
- Until now, the organization has been a symbol, rather than an instrument, of Russian influence in the post-Soviet space.
- Not only is the CSTO side-lined by the SCO, but it has already started playing a subsidiary role for the latter.

It is quite common for international institutions to reconsider their objectives, mission and even the very meaning of their existence as the environment they operate in evolves. It is a completely different matter, though, when, three decades into its life, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is still unable to define its reasons for being or even its practical application. This suggests a systemic problem.

The meeting of the organization's Council of Foreign Ministers that took place in May 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic again served as an illustration of the pending challenge. According to CSTO Secretary General Stanislau Zas, the participants agreed that "security threats to the CSTO member states in all dimensions and in all directions are building up." However, judging by Zas's observations, the only practical response to the circumstances was the conclusion that "in order to ensure their security, the CSTO member states must foster cooperation with other countries and international organizations, specifically with the CIS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization." In other words, the CSTO itself would not dare do anything.

The statements adopted in the follow-up of the meeting corroborate this perception: the one on the 75th anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War, the one reaffirming the commitment to the goals and principles of the UN Charter, the one supporting the UN Secretary General's call for a global ceasefire in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the one on solidarity and mutual assistance in combating the spread of the coronavirus infection. On May 26, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov declared that "the CSTO's potential is highly relevant in order to respond to such threats" and suggested "considering priority arrangements to further biosecurity cooperation." Previously, similar ideas had been put forth in the Russian State Duma. Anyway, practical moves were reduced to the travel restrictions imposed on the CSTO staff, as well as the research-to-practice conference of military medics slated for this November to address the COVID-19 pandemic.

Abstract progress and concrete failures

In June, Speaker of the Russian State Duma Volodin pointed to the need to build the CSTO's capacity to respond to challenges such as the coronavirus pandemic. However, as he provided details, Volodin emphasized a completely different area: "As part of the program for the harmonization and convergence of the legislation, 31 model acts out of 43 have been adopted. The work should be accelerated in order to table the remaining 12 model acts at the autumn session and meet the targets originally set for 2016-2020."

> The CSTO issues regular reports on the promotion of multiple mechanisms and instruments, whose practical value remains unclear, and so does their role in the organization's general activities.

For example, in February 2020, it was reported that the CSTO MPs were discussing the feasibility of an "international institute of historical memory," with the involvement of Serbia. And in mid-May, Zas spoke about the commencement of the establishment of the CSTO's "joint surveillance and reporting system" and other "joint military systems", adding that it was only a "future prospect," while "mechanisms for providing emergency military and technical assistance to the CSTO member states are being improved." Whether anybody has received such assistance at all is not clear, and nor are the volumes and movements of CSTO-led supplies or other types of security assistance.

This backdrop makes difficulties in implementing specific initiatives directly related to the CSTO mission especially pronounced. These include efforts to compile a single list of terrorist organizations. In May, Lavrov demanded: "The CSTO should continue to give its highest priority to identifying foreign militant terrorists, especially those originating

from the CIS countries. The completion of work to make a single list of organizations that the CSTO countries recognize as terrorist would facilitate the development of a reliable shield." At the same time, he made an important reservation: "It would be useful to synchronize the CSTO's anti-terrorist programs with relevant projects of the CIS and the SCO and maximize the consolidation of these organizations' capacity in this area."

Back in 2016, the Collective Security Council of the CSTO Assembly resolved to draw up a single list of terrorist organizations. The decision has not been implemented yet despite the relatively small CSTO membership and the similarity of its members' approaches. Indeed, the seeming diversity of its members notwithstanding, the CSTO is geographically a highly specialized bloc. The organization's only real focus since the 1990s has been Central Asia.

First, it is the only area that has deployed the infrastructure and forces permanently associated with the CSTO. Second, the overwhelming majority of military security measures that have been developed within the CSTO are aimed at countering threats pertaining to the Central Asian region. This is evidenced by both official rhetoric and aspects of the CSTO exercises (scenarios, locations, participants), especially when it comes to relatively large maneuvers. Practicing operations to counteract tactics of radical Islamic groups are the chief priority. According to the CSTO spokesperson Vladimir Zainetdinov, since 2018, the CSTO's exercises have been aimed at practicing "various elements, including the use of the experience of the Russian armed forces in Syria. This includes, among others, combating groups of militants, who use SVBIEDs, as well as the use of drones against armed gangs."

> The infinite "capacity building" never implies any readiness to use it.

The lack of response of the CSTO to the events in Kyrgyzstan as early as in 2009 showed that the bloc's preparedness for real multilateral actions even in its home ground of Central Asia is minimal. In that region, the CSTO is unable to ensure even the minimum engagement of its members, which is clearly evidenced by another skirmish between Kyrgyz and Tajik border guards in late May.

With the COVID-19 pandemic affecting its Central Asian member states more than the bloc's participants elsewhere, the organization's position looks particularly curious. Following the May session of the CSTO Council of Foreign Ministers, some analysts noted that the peace process in Afghanistan involving the Taliban probably gave the CSTO a "false hope of rapid stabilization in Afghanistan. There is an impression that the armed conflict is no longer a priority on the CSTO's agenda." Indeed, while the November CSTO summit in Bishkek addressed not only general issues of international

security, engagement with the UN, promotion of the bloc's military capacity and celebration of the 75th anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War, but also the more specific strengthening of the Tajik–Afghan border, the latter topic was only raised by individual participants at the bloc's recent events. It seems that the CSTO and its members are simply unable to respond to the Afghan events other than by following Washington's peace deal with the Taliban — the pandemic has indeed exacerbated the already difficult domestic political and economic situation in most CSTO countries.

In other areas, activities formally associated with the CSTO have been minimized, and relationships between the member states are essentially bilateral. No wonder that the countries beyond Central Asia have shown limited involvement in exercises related to that region. One example is the series of training events of the Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF) on 8-29 October 2019 conducted successively on six training grounds in Russia, Belarus and Tajikistan under the umbrella of *Battle Brotherhood*. They practiced containing a border conflict and countering extremist organizations and illegal armed groups. A total of about 10,000 personnel from six countries participated, but those parameters may be misleading. The maneuvers' main part took place in Russia's internal regions, and the key final phase — the joint exercise *Unbreakable Brotherhood–2019* — was staged in Tajikistan. The latter was attended by just one unit from Belarus, the peacekeeping company of the 103rd separate airborne brigade.

Resuscitation through expansion?

This notwithstanding, the CSTO is trying to evolve. The rotation of secretaries general introduced in 2016 became an important step. However, the move soon caused a serious issue for the organization, when long spats over the change of general secretaries markedly undermined the already shaky structure of the bloc. The situation stabilized only after Zas was appointment in early 2020.

Since its inception, the organization has lost three members: Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Uzbekistan (the latter even managed to withdraw twice). Azerbaijan has recently been making cautious hints about its interest to join the CSTO, but this will hardly be a possibility as long as Armenia remains a member.

However, the CSTO can barely cope even with the introduction of the institution of observers. Since 2013, Serbia and Afghanistan have enjoyed the status of observers at the CSTO Parliamentary Assembly, whereas Iran's having the status has remained an unresolved issue all the way since 2014, despite that country's participation in some of the CSTO's activities back in the 2000s. At the CSTO summit in Astana in November

2018, it was decided to establish the status of partners and observers, but it has not yet been put in place due to incomplete legal procedures. In May, Sergey Lavrov made a broad hint that Serbia, the CIS and the SCO would become partners and observers.

The CSTO has made repeated proposals to establish cooperation with NATO (specifically, in order to combat international terrorism and drug trafficking, restore stability in Afghanistan, respond to natural and man-caused disasters, ensure security and evacuation of people in crises), but to no avail. In May 2019, participants in a session of the CSTO foreign ministers unsuccessfully — again — suggested that joint consultations be held with NATO.

It is not the first year that the CSTO has strengthened its focus on peacekeeping issues. As Stanislau Zas said in May, starting in 2021, it is planned to begin practical peacekeeping operations. In 2020, a single center should be picked (out of the existing bases in Russia and Kazakhstan) to train peacekeepers in general and more specifically for the UN. However, it turned out that the basic documents of the bloc still need to be finalized in order to ensure the framework for conducting missions under the UN auspices. In particular, it is planned to introduce the concept of a "coordinating state", which will represent the bloc in the UN with respect to the above issues. Furthermore, the UN tends to cooperate with individual countries in peacekeeping matters, rather than with entire associations.

At the November summit in Bishkek, Vladimir Putin called efforts to "ensure the high readiness" of the CSTO peacekeeping forces one of his country's priorities. In 2017, Moscow tried to dispatch the CSTO forces to participate in UN missions in South Sudan and Chad, but the decision turned out to be impossible to approve.

A China-led future or present?

Russia's building up the CSTO as an instrument of its military and political dominance is hardly a point. Up until 2002, the organization existed almost exclusively on paper. A trend emerged later for it to be perceived as another formal mechanism of Russia's expansion, albeit with a nuance. This nuance is named the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

The China-led SCO and the Russia-led CSTO functionally operate in the same field (the SCO's focus is broader, as it encompasses the economic and humanitarian dimensions alongside its security priority) and in many respects in the same region.

> If the Kremlin were having serious leadership ambitions, this would lead to either a Russia–China condominium or a rivalry that some analysts are eager to pinpoint. However, the reality looks more curious and reflects the extent to which Russia is weakening in the global political landscape.

Amid Moscow's willingness to invest in "its own NATO" neither money nor other resources, and its inability to "sell" the CSTO off to the West (i.e. to achieve the CSTO's being embedded in Western security structures), Russia has been making attempts to "palm" it off to Beijing. Nobody's trying to make a secret out of it: as a rule, political rhetoric concerning the promotion of the CSTO coming from the leaders of its member states or functionaries of the bloc includes a peg to the SCO. There is hardly any reciprocity on the part of China, though; it is rather a top-down view. But the merger of the two organizations has already started, and its particulars also suggest the Kremlin's willingness to "adapt" the CSTO to the SCO.

The two blocs have even started having parallel events. One of the recent examples is the working meeting of the heads of international military cooperation offices of the defense authorities in the triple CIS–SCO–CSTO format that was held in Moscow on 4-5 February 2020.

Even more indicative were the Bishkek meetings of the SCO's and the CSTO's foreign ministers held in May 2019 — on the same day, in the same place. Journalists pointed to a rather strange situation: "It would be weird to discuss the CSTO within the framework of the SCO, so the ministers had to hold the welcoming ceremony, the joint photo shoot and then, finally, the general meetings twice (first for the SCO and then for the CSTO)." The key topics of the meetings also coincided.

Russia is not the only one ready to "shake" the CSTO off to the Beijing-led association. Other members of the CSTO pursuing a multi-vectored foreign policy are also actively gravitating towards the SCO and institutions affiliated with China. Four of the six CSTO member states are also members of the SCO; Belarus has the observer status but has long been building its relationship with Beijing being ready to go as far as China is ready to go. Armenia has the status of the SCO dialogue partner. It is symptomatic that Uzbekistan, a former CSTO member, decided to stay in the SCO after it withdrew from the Moscow-led bloc.

A wolf in sheep's clothing or the other way round?

In spite of the serious pandemic-caused challenges the CSTO member states are facing, the bloc once again restricted its response to mere declarations and missed yet another chance to commence an efficient multilateral campaign to resolve problems in the post-Soviet space. After all, the absence of successful integration projects in the entire post-Soviet space and all of its sub-regions is an anomaly. The availability of many potential areas for close cooperation is complemented by the historical experience of engagement; however, the integration initiatives and institutions of post-Soviet countries, including the CSTO, remain ineffective, if not mock projects.

It is widely believed that the CSTO is only an instrument of Russia's "domination". However, this point is highly arguable. Along with some other bloc members, Minsk, for example, has long revised it in search of a neutrality model for the country (which became obvious when the Belarusian government, backed by Kazakhstan, resisted the Kremlin's CRRF plans). After all, being part of multilateral organizations, it is much easier to counterbalance a dominant partner by building alliances with other participants. Furthermore, while relying on the organization, one can work to achieve its own defense or foreign policy goals that have nothing to do with Moscow's plans.

Today, despite the overall state of uncertainty, the CSTO shows two trends.

First, it is its desire to showcase the existence of a military and political union. However, its ability to engage effectively, let alone act in the interests of Moscow, is questionable.

> Metaphorically speaking, one can say that the CSTO is not a "wolf in sheep's clothing" (which will undermine the sovereignty of some of its participants under the slogans of peacekeeping), but exactly the opposite: "a sheep in wolf's clothing".

Second, the Russia-led organization has not become a priority in the Kremlin's policy, and Moscow would have willingly replaced the CSTO with something more valuable long ago. Attempts to link the CSTO to NATO have failed, and the CSTO's main focus has been to get as close to the China-led SCO. The CSTO members are aware of this and are increasingly turning to the SCO. This does not mean that the post-Soviet security organization has no future, though. However, its thirty-year track record of accomplishments is deplorable, and the pandemic disruption has only emphasized its insufficient relevance.

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The paper is part of the project The World HandCOV'd: Assessing longer-term implications of the pandemic disruption for international security. The project is implemented by the Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations and KAS Belarus. The content of the publication represents the views of the author only.



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