

## COLLECTIVE SECURITY TREATY ORGANIZATION (CSTO) AND RUSSIA

# WHY THE CSTO FAILED TO BECOME „RUSSIA'S NATO“

Dmitri Stratievski

September 2023



Upon the collapse of the USSR, Russia had a chance to create an effective regional military-political alliance. However, it failed to seize this opportunity under the presidency of both Yeltsin and Putin. As it turned out, Moscow simply had nothing substantial to offer to its allies.



The full-scale conflict waged by Russia against Ukraine has further intensified the pre-existing deep-rooted conflicts within the CSTO. For four out of the six member states, engaging in a confrontation with the West is not only politically and economically disadvantageous but also perilous.



Despite the clear inclination of most CSTO member states' governments to politically distance themselves from the Kremlin, the organization is not on the brink of a total breakdown in the near future.

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# WHY THE CSTO FAILED TO BECOME “RUSSIA’S NATO”

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In the context of Russia’s war against Ukraine, public and political discussions refer to various actors who are already part of the confrontation, provide assistance to this or that belligerent party, express solidarity with it, or could potentially be involved in the conflict. However, the CSTO, the military-political alliance led by the Russian Federation for 31 years, is rarely mentioned outside of the expert community. The CSTO charter stipulates the „collective defense of the independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the member states“ (Article 3), but in crisis situations, the members of this organization fail to show solidarity either with their leader or with each other. How did Russia build its own military alliance, and what goals did it pursue? What conflict have arisen between member states and how has Moscow reacted to them? Why does the CSTO remain neutral in Russia’s war against Ukraine? What are the organization’s prospects for the future?

## CSTO ORIGINS AND MEMBERS

After the collapse of the USSR in December 1991, the Russian Federation leadership made considerable efforts to maintain a unified command of the Armed Forces of the former Union. The priorities were simple: if Moscow could not keep all the control, then at least some kind of unified military space should be formed in the post-Soviet territory. The Kremlin focused on the 12 former Soviet republics, excluding the Baltic states, which were irrevocably seeking to join Western frameworks.

*WITH THE FAILURE OF THE UNITED ARMED FORCES PROJECT WITHIN THE CIS, IT BECAME CLEAR TO MOSCOW THAT THE NEW STATES PRIORITIZED THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR OWN NATIONAL ARMIES TO AVOID DELEGATING AUTHORITY TO SUPRANATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS, AND THIS PROCESS WAS IRREVERSIBLE.*

Boris Yeltsin and would-be Defense Minister Pavel Grachev, who was then gaining political weight, sought to create some kind of NATO-style defense bloc, but in a way that would be acceptable to potential members. Given the instability of the early 1990s, the wide range of threats and the complex process of nation-building, what could unite the potential members of the alliance was collective security, i.e. the obligation of the members of the defense alliance to assist each other in the event of external aggression. In light of the events of 1991-1992, this idea should have become the most attractive for the countries of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (following the seizure of power by Islamic groups in Afghanistan and the civil war in Tajikistan), as well as the South Caucasus (in the wake of the civil war in Georgia, the separatism of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the explosive situation in Azerbaijan).

*THE PRIMACY OF COLLECTIVE SECURITY WAS THE BASIS FOR THE COLLECTIVE SECURITY TREATY (CST) AGREEMENT SIGNED IN MAY 1992 IN TASHKENT BY REPRESENTATIVES OF ARMENIA, KAZAKHSTAN, KYRGYZSTAN, RUSSIA AND UZBEKISTAN. IN MAY 2002, A CONFERENCE IN MOSCOW TRANSFORMED THE TREATY INTO A FULL-FLEDGED INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION, NOW CALLED THE CSTO.*

Over the years, the CSTO’s composition has undergone significant changes. In 1993, Belarus, Azerbaijan and Georgia joined the alliance. In April 1999, the most massive withdrawal of states from the CSTO took place. Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan left the organization. For Baku, it made no sense to stay in the organization any longer. Even if at that time Azerbaijan did not count on Moscow’s benevolent neutrality in the Karabakh conflict, it was at least counting on a reduction in military, political and financial support for Yerevan. Hopes for Russian arms deliveries were not justified either. Heydar Ali-

yev adopted a moderate Western course with formal neutrality, and in 2011, Azerbaijan became a member of the Non-Aligned Movement. Baku did not respond to Moscow's repeated offers to rejoin the alliance. For example, in 2009, it ignored the proposals made by CSTO leaders. Since the late 1990s, Georgia has pursued a consistent anti-Kremlin agenda, incompatible with CSTO membership. Tbilisi became convinced that on the issue of South Ossetian and Abkhaz separatism, no compromise with the Kremlin was possible. Uzbekistan, which aspired to regional leadership, was no longer interested in the CSTO membership. Islam Karimov distanced himself from Moscow and sought rapprochement with the U.S., Pakistan and China. In 2006, after the suppression of protests in Andijan and a harsh Western reaction, Tashkent returned to the alliance under a simplified procedure. In the six years that followed, Uzbekistan's membership in the organization was largely nominal. The Uzbek armed forces did not participate in CSTO exercises, while Karimov and Putin clearly did not get along. In 2012, Uzbekistan finally left the CSTO, although three years earlier, the organization's secretary claimed that there was "no talk of secession"<sup>1</sup>. Tajik politician Shodi Shabdolov described Tashkent's move as follows: "This is a very dangerous situation. The credibility of the organization has been seriously undermined. NATO members also have many disagreements, but it is hard to imagine that, for example, Turkey could enter or leave the bloc. I do not rule out that there were some agreements between Tashkent and NATO in this regard"<sup>2</sup>.

*THE KREMLIN MADE REPEATED ATTEMPTS TO INVOLVE UKRAINE IN SOME FORM OF COOPERATION WITH THE CSTO. VARIOUS OPTIONS FOR COOPERATION HAVE BEEN CONSIDERED: FULL MEMBERSHIP, OBSERVER STATUS OR AD HOC PARTICIPATION IN SUMMITS AND EXERCISES.*

The latest efforts of this kind date back to 2010. Just before the second round of the presidential election in Ukraine, which Viktor Yanukovich was highly likely to win, CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha said that the organization welcomed cooperation with Ukraine both on the basis of membership and in any

other format that would suit Kyiv<sup>3</sup>. However, the new Ukrainian leadership, represented by the foreign minister and the head of the presidential administration, quickly denied the possibility of joining the CSTO. Even for Yanukovich and his team, such a clear rapprochement with Russia seemed unacceptable. The most Moscow managed to achieve was the opening of the organization's branch in Kyiv under a somewhat toned-down name of the "CSTO Institute". The branch's activity was limited to holding a few events. The Moscow headquarters of the CSTO was dissolved in 2019.

## **"STRANGE ALLIANCE" AND POSITIONING IN REGIONAL CONFLICTS**

*OVER TIME, THE KREMLIN'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE CSTO HAS NOTICEABLY CHANGED.*

The most ambitious period of the CSTO can be traced back to Yeltsin rather than Putin. It was under Yeltsin that the Russian leadership was seriously considering some kind of collective security arrangements under Moscow's umbrella, if not as a replica of NATO, then in a similar format. Even though it was under Putin that the alliance took on its current shape, including the effective treaties and charter, governance structures and membership, Moscow has failed in the past two decades to demonstrate a clear understanding of the organization's strategy and to define its place in its own expansionist plans.

*THE ADOPTION OF THE AGREEMENT ON CSTO PEACEKEEPING IN OCTOBER 2007 COULD BE AN ECHO OF THE SEARCH FOR THE ALLIANCE'S RAISON D'ÊTRE.*

14 years later, the document was supplemented with a clause on the "coordinating state" under whose auspices peacekeeping operations within the UN can be carried out. This is similar to the imitation of similar processes in NATO after the end of the Cold War.

*BUT THIS NEXT PARADIGM SHIFT OF THE CSTO WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIA'S GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGY OF THE 2010-2020S, WHICH INCLUDED BETS ON STRENGTH AND ACTIVE CONFRONTATION WITH THE WEST, SIGNIFIED, IF ANYTHING, MOSCOW'S UNCERTAINTY.*

1 [https://odkb-csto.org/news/smi/odkb\\_o\\_vykhode\\_uzbekistana\\_iz\\_organizatsii\\_rechi\\_ne\\_idyet\\_/?bxajaxid=18a73a444138192758c-60ccab20504c0#loaded](https://odkb-csto.org/news/smi/odkb_o_vykhode_uzbekistana_iz_organizatsii_rechi_ne_idyet_/?bxajaxid=18a73a444138192758c-60ccab20504c0#loaded)

2 [https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2012/06/120629\\_uzbekistan\\_odkb\\_exit](https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2012/06/120629_uzbekistan_odkb_exit)

3 [https://odkb-csto.org/news/smi/odkb\\_otkryta\\_k\\_sotrudnichestvu\\_s\\_ukrainoy\\_bordyuzha/#loaded](https://odkb-csto.org/news/smi/odkb_otkryta_k_sotrudnichestvu_s_ukrainoy_bordyuzha/#loaded)

Unequal relations between members have become the CSTO's trademark. The distribution of positions within its governing structures can serve as a case in point. In 2002, the Joint Staff was set up in Moscow, occupying the building that formerly housed the Warsaw Treaty Organization Headquarters. The symbolic parallel with the Soviet-era Warsaw Treaty was also evident in the appointments to the post of Chief of Staff. In the 21 years of its existence, non-Russian generals have been in charge of the Joint Staff for a total of less than nine years, and that was only during the initial period. Since 2012, the chair has been held exclusively by Russians.

*OF THE 20 YEARS SINCE THE CURRENT CSTO TREATY CAME INTO FORCE (2003), THE SECRETARY GENERAL'S OFFICE WAS HELD BY RUSSIANS FOR A TOTAL OF 16 YEARS.*

The governments of those states that eventually left the CSTO, but also Moscow's seemingly loyal allies, have reason to raise concerns about Russia's leadership.

*IN THE THREE DECADES OF ITS EXISTENCE, DESPITE MANY CONFLICTS WITHIN ITS MEMBER STATES, BETWEEN THEM OR WITH AN OUTSIDE STATE, CSTO FORCES WERE USED ONLY ONCE, DURING THE MASS RIOTS IN KAZAKHSTAN IN JANUARY 2022. THIS OPERATION WAS THE CSTO'S ONLY SUCCESS.*

Today the most vehement criticism of the Kremlin and its understanding of alliance is voiced by Yerevan. Armenia, the founding state of the CST/CSTO, has for many years displayed a high degree of loyalty to Russia. It has not only hosted the Russian 102 military base on its territory but also gave Russia the opportunity to relocate the headquarters of the Russian Forces Group in the Transcaucasus, which was withdrawn from Georgia. In 2019, Armenia granted permission for a significant expansion of the base. Until recently, Yerevan has avoided criticizing the Russian Federation and has consistently followed its lead in the international arena, voting in sync with Russia at the UN. Russia's political, economic and partly military dominance allowed some observers to argue that Moscow effectively "controls" Armenia. Serious disputes in the military field started between the two countries around 2016, when information about the delay in Russian arms deliveries was leaked to the media<sup>4</sup>.

The main stumbling block in relations between the two countries was expectedly the number one issue for Armenia—Nagorno-Karabakh. Even before the Second Karabakh War in 2020, the Armenian leadership repeatedly protested against arms deliveries to Azerbaijan, considered a "strategic partner" by Moscow<sup>5</sup>. Criticism became constant after the outbreak of hostilities, especially after Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev's interview with *Le Figaro*, in which he described Russia as Azerbaijan's main arms supplier<sup>6</sup>. The conflict culminated in the de facto refusal of the CSTO and Russia to support Armenia's request for assistance "in restoring territorial integrity and ensuring the withdrawal of Azerbaijani armed forces from Armenian territory"<sup>7</sup>. Yerevan's response was harsh: it refused to sign the CSTO Collective Security Council declaration and announced its participation in NATO exercises<sup>8</sup>. The country's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has repeatedly raised doubts about the CSTO's future and Armenia's possible withdrawal from it<sup>9</sup>.

*THE CSTO HAS REMAINED PASSIVE IN ARMED CONFLICTS IN CENTRAL ASIA, A KEY REGION FOR THE ALLIANCE.*

The CSTO did not interfere in any way during the war in Tajikistan in 1992-1997 and its relapses in 2010-2012, during the mass unrest in Kyrgyzstan and then in the south of the country in 2010, and during the two military clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 2021-2022. This created a paradox: for example, CSTO exercises in Tajikistan involved countering the invasion of "insurgents," but in reality, the organization's forces did not take part in such actions. Emomali Rahmon had no political opportunity to express his discontent openly but took unambiguous symbolic steps. For illustration, the armed forces of Tajikistan did not take part in the "Rubezh-2018" maneuvers on its own territory. The reaction of the CSTO and Russia to the Kyrgyz-Uzbek clashes in Osh in 2010 was indicative. Then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev ruled out the deployment of CSTO troops to Kyrgyzstan, calling the issue an internal affair<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, various scenarios, including the use of CSTO forces,<sup>11</sup>

4 <https://golosarmenii.am/article/40689/zaderzhek-v-postavkax-rossijskogo-oruzhiya-armenii-ne-budet>

5 <https://vz.ru/world/2016/4/8/804094.html>

6 <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/ilham-aliev-l-armenie-devra-tenir-compte-de-la-nouvelle-realite-20201023>

7 <https://www.forbes.ru/society/477109-pasinan-raskryl-pros-bu-armenii-k-odkb-posle-obstrelov-na-granice-s-azerbajdzanom>

8 <https://www.rbc.ua/ukr/news/virmeniya-vizme-uchast-viyskovih-navchannyah-1680792845.html>

9 <https://www.interfax.ru/world/904410>

10 <http://www.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=14928&mode=snews>

11 <https://ria.ru/20100614/246162490.html>

were voiced, but Russia gave no response. It did not dare to use its Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan to turn it into a logistical hub for a peacekeeping operation. In 2022, during a period of intense armed confrontation on the border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the CSTO merely called for peace. Bishkek, like Dushanbe, did not directly criticize Russia's passivity, but Kyrgyz Deputy Foreign Minister Nuran Niyazaliyev called for "launching CSTO mechanisms that will prevent armed conflicts between members of the organization"<sup>12</sup>. Observers suggested that the Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises planned to be held in Kyrgyzstan in November 2022 were canceled because of the previous developments in the regions bordering Tajikistan<sup>13</sup>. Political scientist Almaz Tazhibay has pointed out the CSTO's ineffectiveness, lack of resources, intense contradictions and even clashes between member states, he has also underlined that the organization was "a far cry from becoming even a mini-Warsaw treaty". Citing the success of the Central Asian summit in Xi'an, Tazhibay calls China a more promising military and economic ally for Kyrgyzstan<sup>14</sup>.

Belarus, Russia's closest ally, has also raised concerns about the CSTO. In 2019, the pro-governmental Belarusian Military-Political Review quite frankly outlined the systemic crisis of the organization: "Despite all the benefits offered by Moscow and the commonly stated goals within the framework of this structure, the member states often pursue ambiguous and sometimes contradictory policies, which creates certain difficulties for the establishment of the Organization in the international arena, and also significantly undermines the image of the CSTO. (...) It can be assumed that the CSTO remains a fragmented quasi-alliance, the sum of Russia's bilateral military alliances with other member states of the Organization. Moscow is the only linchpin uniting countries that are unwilling to assume obligations towards each other (...)

*IN REALITY, THE MEMBER STATES, IN THE MANNER TYPICAL OF POST-SOVIET ENTITIES, SEEK TO MAXIMIZE BENEFITS, WHILE INCURRING MINIMUM COSTS AND ASSUMING MINIMUM OBLIGATIONS"<sup>15</sup>.*

Finally, in 2022, even Putin recognized the existence of "problems" within the CSTO<sup>16</sup>.

## RUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE: THE BOILING POINT

*THE BEGINNING OF RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE HAS FURTHER DEEPENED THE CONTRADICTIONS WITHIN THE CSTO AND ACCELERATED THE ALIENATION OF MOST OF ITS MEMBERS FROM RUSSIA.*

The attitude of the Organization's member states to the war and the Kremlin's actions was conditioned by the following factors.

*FIRST, NONE OF THE CSTO MEMBERS, WITH THE EXCEPTION OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, HAD TERRITORIAL CLAIMS TO UKRAINE. NO CSTO STATE, INCLUDING BELARUS, RECOGNIZED CRIMEA AS PART OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION OR QUESTIONED UKRAINIAN JURISDICTION IN DONBAS.*

The leaders of Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan avoided criticizing the Ukrainian leadership, did not comment on Kyiv's European and Euro-Atlantic agenda and the so-called anti-terrorist operation in eastern Ukraine. Only Alexander Lukashenko openly challenged Petro Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelenskyy, but there were reconciliatory overtones from the two capitals on a number of occasions. There were well-established economic ties between the CSTO states and Ukraine, which were actively expanding as the COVID-19 pandemic waned. For example, trade turnover between Kyiv and Minsk increased by 50% in 2021 compared to 2020, between Kyiv and Nursultan/Astana by 30%, and between Kyiv and Yerevan by 24%.

*SECOND, IT BECAME CLEAR AT THE VERY BEGINNING OF THE WAR THAT RUSSIA WAS ALREADY ENGAGED IN A LONG-TERM, SEVERE CONFRONTATION WITH THE WEST, WHICH IMPLIES TANGIBLE RISKS FOR ALL CSTO MEMBERS.*

The Central Asian members of the organization have good working relations with the European Union and the United States, which the parties would not want to disrupt. U.S. direct investment in Kazakhstan's

<sup>12</sup> <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/15995359>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.dw.com/ru/kyrgyzstan-otmenil-ucenia-v-ramkah-odkb/a-63384327>

<sup>14</sup> <https://vesti.kg/politika/item/112436-krizis-v-odkb-kakie-perspektivy-uvoenno-politicheskogo-soyuza-kuda-vkhodit-kyrgyzstan.html>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.belvpo.com/%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BA%D0%B1-%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BD%D0%BE-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B9-%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%8E%D0%B7-%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%B8-%D0%B8/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://tass.ru/politika/16408427>

economy is particularly high (more than \$62 billion since 1993), and trade turnover is growing noticeably. Washington and Astana call their partnership “strategic”<sup>17</sup>. For Yerevan, relations with Paris are of vital importance. France was one of the first countries in the world to recognize the Armenian genocide, it is the second largest investor in Armenia’s economy after Russia and acts as Armenia’s de facto advocate in the West. The neutral position of China, an important player in the region that effectively limits Russia’s influence has also become important for Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Beijing has unambiguously prioritized peacekeeping in the current conflict. The Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO), led by Chinese diplomat Zhang Ming, which includes the above states, has advocated for an “early resolution of the crisis,” keeping its distance from Russia’s aggressive narrative.

*FINALLY, WITH THE EXCEPTION OF BELARUS, THE CSTO COUNTRIES, SEEING NO GEOPOLITICAL MOTIVATION TO SUPPORT RUSSIA BUT HAVING THE ABILITY TO MAINTAIN A DISTANCE, CHOSE A NEUTRAL STRATEGY, WHICH WAS ALSO REFLECTED IN THE UN VOTES.*

However, neutrality can mean different things. For example, Astana, while not formally calling Russia an aggressor, has banned the display of the Russian military Z and V insignia in public space and sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine. The Kazakhstani authorities are sensitive to any open calls for separatism in the north of the country. In August 2022, two social media users from Petropavlovsk who called for North Kazakhstan Oblast to join Russia were sentenced to five years in prison. President Kasym-Jomart Tokayev refused to recognize the “quasi-state territories of the LPR and DPR” and expressed support for “the territorial integrity of states as a fundamental principle of the UN.” Tokayev’s position finds sympathy in Kazakhstan’s society.

*AT THE BEGINNING OF THE WAR, THE NUMBER OF KAZAKHS SUPPORTING RUSSIA WAS ONLY 39%, AND BY THE END OF 2022 IT HAD FALLEN TO 13%, NOTICEABLY BEHIND SUPPORTERS OF NEUTRALITY (59%) AND EVEN SUPPORTERS OF UKRAINE (22%)<sup>18</sup>.*

Armenia has also explicitly distanced itself from the Russian war. In an interview with CNN, Pashinyan made his position clear, “It’s never been said out loud,

but I think it’s obvious: we are not Russia’s allies in the war with Ukraine. And our feeling about this war, about this conflict, is anxiety because it directly affects all our relations”<sup>19</sup>. Officials in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan either avoided comment or used the vaguest possible language, but neither was heard to support Russia’s actions.

*GIVEN THE OBJECTIVE IMPOSSIBILITY OF USING THE CSTO PLATFORM TO LEGITIMIZE THE WAR AGAINST UKRAINE, MOSCOW WAS FORCED TO ABANDON SUCH ATTEMPTS.*

As a result, a formula of non-interference was chosen, with reference to the organization’s scope of responsibility. This was expressed in statements by the Kazakh Foreign Ministry in October 2022 and the CSTO Joint Staff in February 2023. The role of “bad cop” was assigned to Minsk, represented by Lukashenko and Stanislav Zasyu, CSTO secretary general until January 2023, who advocated strengthening the alliance in opposition to the “Western threat”. Lukashenko’s appeals to CSTO members to take a position on the war in Ukraine went unanswered.

## PROSPECTS, FINAL CONCLUSIONS

The collective statements of the CSTO member states (made at the leaders’ meeting in May 2022, at the summit in November 2022, and at the Parliamentary Assembly Council in May 2023) are becoming less specific and increasingly resemble vague documents from the plenums of the CPSU Central Committee, full of slogans and general phrases.

*HOWEVER, DESPITE THE SIGNIFICANT CONTRADICTIONS AND SIGNS OF DISCONTENT THAT ARE EITHER OPENLY OR INDIRECTLY COMING FROM THE CSTO CAPITALS, THE ORGANIZATION IS NOT IN DANGER OF DISINTEGRATION IN THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE. THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION STILL HAS A SUFFICIENT SET OF INSTRUMENTS TO PRESSURE ITS ALLIES, FROM GEOPOLITICS TO THE ECONOMY AND THE STATUS OF MIGRANT WORKERS.*

Russia has a military presence on the territory of all these states. For both the main troublemakers, Armenia and Kazakhstan, and the “neutral” Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Russia is a major trading partner. Yerevan has to reckon with Moscow on the Nagorno-

<sup>17</sup> [https://forbes.kz/economy/investment/skolko\\_ssha\\_investirovali\\_v\\_kazahstan\\_za\\_30\\_let/](https://forbes.kz/economy/investment/skolko_ssha_investirovali_v_kazahstan_za_30_let/)

<sup>18</sup> <https://demos.kz/opros-osnovnaja-dolja-storonnikov-rossii-v-kazahstane-starshe-60-let-za-ukrainu-molodezh/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://rus.azatutyun.am/a/32439155.html>

Karabakh issue, and Astana has to take into account the unlikely, but still theoretically possible, aggravation of the situation in Northern Kazakhstan. For Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation remains a regional leader that preserves the balance of power in Central Asia, a “familiar partner and defender”. Moscow also fulfills requests from Dushanbe and Bishkek to deport political activists and provides targeted support to certain politicians. Beijing, which has considerable influence in the region, has no plans to create an Asian military-political bloc, but uses its economic, political and cultural leverage, including through branches of the Confucius Institute, the SCO and the new Central Asia-China format enshrined in the May 2023 Xi’an Declaration.

*NATO DOES NOT PERCEIVE THE CSTO AS AN EQUAL MILITARY ALLIANCE AND DOES NOT CONSIDER IT A THREAT, NOR DOES THE WEST OFFER THE MEMBERS OF THE PRO-RUSSIAN ORGANIZATION ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS FOR COLLECTIVE SECURITY.*

At present, none of the CSTO states see any tangible geopolitical advantages in withdrawing from the CSTO. For them, direct confrontation with Russia is fraught with serious consequences. At the same time, the elites of these states have a strong desire to remain aloof from Russian foreign policy ventures, while maintaining favorable economic relations with Russia, including the common market of the EAEU, which would cease to exist in the event of open defiance. Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and potentially Tajikistan will increasingly resort to a “multi-vector policy,” analogous to Ukraine’s policy under Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yanukovich.

*THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION HAD A HIGH CHANCE TO CREATE AND DEVELOP ITS OWN FUNCTIONAL MILITARY-POLITICAL ALLIANCE IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE. THIS WAS FACILITATED BY OBJECTIVE STARTING CONDITIONS: THE COMMON EXPERIENCE OF THE USSR, RUSSIA-FRIENDLY SENTIMENTS IN A NUMBER OF STATES THAT BECAME MEMBERS OF THE CSTO, RUSSIA’S NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND THE MOST POWERFUL ARMY IN THE CIS, WHICH ALLOWED THE ELITES OF THE MEMBER STATES OR THE ELITES OF CANDIDATE COUNTRIES TO SEE MOSCOW AS A SECURITY UMBRELLA, AS A GUARANTOR OF TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY AND REGIMES’ STABILITY.*

The desire to create unified structures of collective security in the face of external and internal threats in the Central Asian and Caucasus regions and the absence of systemic attempts by other geopolitical actors, such as the West or, later, China, to prevent such unification played an important role. Finally, an authoritarian socio-political model similar to Russia’s was created in a number of post-Soviet states, which allowed leaders to “negotiate directly” without “unnecessary democratic formalities” and without, for example, considering the protests of civil society or the opposition. Moscow did not take advantage of these opportunities.

*THE CSTO IS NOT A MILITARY-POLITICAL BLOC OR AN ALLIANCE IN THE DIRECT SENSE OF THE TERM.*

Although there are disagreements within NATO regarding certain events, the alliance develops a common political position, including response to crisis situations, and clearly conveys it in the international arena. For example, only three NATO states did not recognize Kosovo’s independence, of which Spain explained its move by not wanting to create a precedent for its own separatists, and Greece transparently hinted at the painful issue of Northern Cyprus. Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, as well as the “independence” of the “LDPR” with the subsequent “incorporation” of four regions of Ukraine into the Russian Federation in 2022 have not been recognized by any of Russia’s CSTO allies. The heads of four of the six CSTO states avoid joint anti-Western statements in tune with Moscow or Minsk. The difference is also noticeable in the alliances’ performance. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has conducted at least 30 operations that have consisted of both deterrence, patrolling and monitoring, as well as direct military involvement. The missions in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Afghanistan were long-term and large-scale. The CSTO conducted only one week-long operation in Kazakhstan with a small number of troops during the same period. Even this limited action provoked mixed reactions and was followed by protests in Kyrgyzstan and Armenia.

*RUSSIA LACKS A VISION FOR THE FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF THE CSTO. NOT ONLY HAS IT FAILED TO CREATE A MECHANISM FOR COLLECTIVE SECURITY IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE, BUT IT HAS ALSO FAILED TO PREVENT ARMED CONFLICTS BETWEEN MEMBERS OF THE ORGANIZATION OR TO PLAY A KEY ROLE IN THEIR EARLY RESOLUTION.*



Over the three decades of the CSTO's existence, which had eight member states at its peak, its members have confronted each other with weapons at least four times: Azerbaijan and Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in Osh, and twice Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in border regions. By comparison, NATO was founded 74 years ago and now includes 31 states. Armed conflict between members has erupted only once, between Turkey and Greece in Cyprus.

*THE KREMLIN DOES NOT HAVE THE RESOURCES TO TURN THE CSTO INTO A MANAGEABLE INSTRUMENT TO SUPPORT ITS POLITICAL AMBITIONS. THE CREATION OF AN EQUAL, MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL ALLIANCE IS NOT ONLY OUTSIDE THE KREMLIN'S INTERESTS, BUT IS ALSO HARDLY POSSIBLE IN THE CURRENT GEOPOLITICAL REALITIES. THUS THE CSTO REMAINS A STATUS ITEM FOR RUSSIA, AN APPENDAGE OF A "SUPER-POWER," REGARDLESS OF THE NOMINAL AND DYSFUNCTIONAL CHARACTER OF THE CSTO TREATY AND ITS MILITARY-POLITICAL ALLIANCE.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## ABSTRACTS



After the collapse of the USSR, Russia had a chance to create effective regional military-political alliances. As it turned out, Moscow simply had nothing substantial to offer to its allies. Not only did Russia fail to create a system of collective security in its strategically important regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus, but it also couldn't prevent periodic armed conflicts among the organization's members or play a decisive role in their prompt resolution. The Kremlin lacks the means to transform the CSTO into a compliant force for supporting its political initiatives. Moreover, the creation of a genuinely equal alliance does not serve Moscow's interests and it is hardly achievable in the current geopolitical landscape.



The full-scale conflict waged by Russia against Ukraine has further intensified the pre-existing deep-rooted conflicts within the CSTO. For four out of the six member states, engaging in a confrontation with the West is not only politically and economically disadvantageous but also perilous. These countries have a significant trade volume and economic ties with the EU and the USA, actively cultivating connections with Ukraine. Requiring Western investments and a favorable business climate, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have opted for neutrality in Russia's war against Ukraine. The Kremlin, lacking the ability to compel allies to support its actions, even through a joint statement, was forced to concur with this position.



Yerevan, Astana, Bishkek, and Dushanbe are gradually distancing themselves from Moscow. Although these shifts occur in a non-linear fashion, they take on different forms and vary in intensity depending on the domestic political situations in these respective states. Despite the clear inclination of most CSTO member states' governments to politically distance themselves from the Kremlin, the organization is not on the brink of a total collapse in the near future. On one hand, the member states of the organization continue to rely on Russia's military, political, and trade-economic spheres. Thus, making a decision such as withdrawing from the CSTO is a resource-intensive endeavor fraught with significant risks. On the other hand, major global players such as the European Union, the United States, and China do not present alternative models of collective security to these post-Soviet states.