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How Russia is trying to compete with NATO

Through the CSTO, Russia is trying to become a regional peacekeeper, but it is unlikely that the organisation can be an alternative to NATO

These days, the notion of collective defence is interpreted very broadly, as more and more areas of society become securitised. Unfortunately, authoritarian regimes are taking advantage of this development by widening the limits of state interference both in the affairs of the citizens within their own country and the ones in neighbouring states.

Practically all institutions of Eurasian (post-Soviet) integration are characterised by shortcomings. In general, there is a lack of horizontal, sustainable connections, normativity, and adherence to principles. This institutional deficit is made up by voluntarism, opportunism, and an ad-hoc nature. The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), as a post-Soviet structure of integration, is marked by all these features. Ordinarily, the purpose of regional organisations, which work towards integration in important areas such as defence, is to delegate some national powers to the supranational level. If this does not happen, it begs the question: what is the purpose of such a structure and does it have a future?

A flawed solution to address security questions

At the inception of the Collective Security Treaty (CST) in 1992, the main challenge for the post-Soviet space was the politico-military situation in Afghanistan. Accordingly, the agreement was signed in Tashkent. It soon became clear that the CST was not a viable structure to ensure regional security on the 'southern flank'. All subsequent events showed that the division of the 'Soviet legacy' came to the fore, and in addition to the civil war in Tajikistan, the threat of radical Islamism by the Taliban emerged in the region.

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In an attempt to respond to the Islamist threat in the south and NATO's eastward expansion, Moscow initiated the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) ten years later on the basis of the CST (Collective Security Treaty). But it has not solved the problem of regional security. New challenges and threats of an 'internal nature' emerged on the 'southern flank' of the CSTO: the Kyrgyz revolutions of 2005 and 2010, the Andijan uprising in 2005, the border conflicts between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and the activities of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) that is allied with Al-Qaida and the Taliban in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. CSTO members did not believe in the organisation's power to solve the regional security problem.

On the 'western flank' there were no security concerns but different issues. The attractiveness of European integration has led to EU enlargement. This has become a real challenge for the Kremlin's project of Eurasian integration. In search for new institutional answers, Moscow proposed the creation of a Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF) in 2009 to quickly address security concerns. At the time, Alexander Lukashenko was the proposal's main critic. As observers noted, the de facto government in Minsk linked it to the provision of economic preferences and aid. For the first time, the 'birth trauma' of the CSTO was clearly outlined here: the underdevelopment of horizontal ties within the organisation and the reluctance to develop them.

Lack of support for Armenian interest

Back in 2009, when the de facto government in Minsk expressed its position, it became clear that Armenia, the only CSTO member in the South Caucasus, could not rely on the organisation for help in its conflict with Azerbaijan. Moreover, given Baku's solvency and excellent trade links with all CSTO countries, it was not advantageous to rely on further support even in the event of an armed conflict.

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As time and subsequent wars have shown, the CSTO won't guarantee the security of Armenian interests in Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, Russia and Belarus have produced and exported arms to Azerbaijan without any restrictions. On Armenia's part, Russia

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remained the sole moderator of the entire Nagorno-Karabakh story. Although instruments such as the CRRF already existed, the CSTO effectively refused assistance to Yerevan in the summer of 2020. The factor of Turkic solidarity also deserves attention. The support of the Turkic Council, which includes CSTO member states such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, during the armed conflict was positively assessed by Azerbaijani officials in 2021.

The creation of a 'coordinating state'

The protests in Belarus in the second half of 2020, which had a purely domestic political agenda, changed the regional situation with significant geopolitical implications. The political isolation of the Lukashenko regime – because of massive electoral fraud and equally large-scale violence – turned into a growing dependence on Russia. The Union State project began to take shape, which concerns the coordination of power blocs, from the army to special services, in particular. All subsequent joint actions and positions on the CSTO are the result of Lukashenko's emerging dependence on the Kremlin.

On 16 September 2021, at the CSTO summit in Dushanbe, a Protocol amending the CSTO Peacekeeping Agreement was signed. The introduction of the concept of a 'coordinating state' stands out as one of the main points of the agreement. In essence, the idea is that collective peacekeeping forces are established exclusively under the auspices of the 'coordinating state', which is determined by the supreme body of the Collective Security Council.

In the long term, this means that the CSTO can participate in UN peacekeeping operations, similar to NATO's worldwide operations, and not only in its area of responsibility. Thus, the CSTO, or rather Russia, is trying to become a regional peacekeeper. It is known that the operational forces of regional organisations will receive a UN mandate, following a series of failures to resolve conflicts and allow large-scale violence in Africa. In particular, the African Union is engaged in such activities. The Kremlin's ambitions lie not only in Eurasia, but also far beyond. A case in point is Moscow's involvement in the conflict in Syria and its tacit engagement in Libya.

Many experts have linked the signing of the Protocol to paving the way for a war in Ukraine. This is partly true, but it should be taken into

account that a ratification procedure is still necessary to put these changes into effect. As of today, only the Russian State Duma has ratified the document; all other CSTO member states have not yet voted for these changes.

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While Lukashenko actively supported Russia's 'special operation' in Ukraine, it was not mentioned in the joint statement on the results of the CSTO anniversary summit on 16 May. This may indicate a behind-the-scenes resistance to 'dragging' other CSTO member states into an open discussion and demonstration of solidarity with Russia in the war against Ukraine.

Furthermore, the Armenian side, lamenting the lack of solidarity on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, stresses that decision-making on the use of the CRRF is dependent on different factors and that there is no internal unity.

The threats to regional security in Central Asia have still not been addressed. Just at the time of the meeting of heads of CSTO member states, there were armed clashes in Gorno-Badakhshan in Tajikistan.

The CSTO has clearly stated its ambitious goal of establishing a collective peacekeeping force under the leadership of a 'coordinating state'. The organisation's goal is now clear, but its implementation remains in question. It is unlikely that the organisation can become a kind of alternative to NATO. Whereas NATO's central element is collective defence (which has been proven time and again), and assistance in emergencies is offered to all without exception, the CSTO demonstrates a selective exercise of defensive functions. There is a lack of unanimity and trust within the organisation, and institutional deficiencies are evident. And the introduction of a 'coordinating state' for peacekeeping indicates Russia's desire to use the CSTO as an instrument to strengthen its own political-military influence.



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