

NATO versus CSTO: The Clash between Competing Military Alliances

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Nearly two decades after it was formed, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a seven-member regional security bloc led by Russia, is rapidly expanding its profile in the evolving global security architecture and is emerging as an alternative to counter the designs of the US and NATO in the Central Asian region.

The pressure from NATO and the US on the former Soviet Central Asian republics is spiking tensions in the extended region, including Afghanistan, Iran and the Middle East. NATO's manoeuvres, under the garb of advancing democratic values and freedoms, has made the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a military-political regional security bloc led by Russia, all the more important in countering common threats and in influencing the evolution of the global security architecture.

The CSTO was signed into force on May 15, 1992 during a volatile period of speedy changes and transformation of the security architecture in the Eurasian area. The seven-member regional security bloc includes Russia, Belarus, Armenia and the four former Soviet Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The CSTO seeks to jointly combat drug-trafficking, terrorism, and organised crime, with its member states pledging to provide immediate military assistance to each other in the event of an attack.

In the 1990s, Russia, which played a leading role in uniting the seven former Soviet republics under the CSTO, was already feeling the threat of the NATO's eastward expansion close to its borders and the planned deployment by the US of the national missile shield in East Europe. In fact, Moscow has long considered the Central Asian countries as Russia's sphere of influence and has viewed with alarm Washington's rising military profile in the region, especially since the 2001 overthrow of the Taliban leadership in Afghanistan.

NATO's eastward expansion and the US' missile shield plan in East Europe compelled the CSTO to create a Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF) for deployment in Central Asia. The agreement on the CRRF was signed on June 14, 2009 which aimed at repelling aggression, carrying out special operation and fighting terrorism. The CRRF is also responsible for responding to emergency situations and providing emergency humanitarian

assistance, reinforcing armed forces covering national borders and guarding member-states' public and military facilities, and resolving challenges identified by the CSTO's Collective Security Council.

"The Collective Rapid Reaction Force will be well-equipped and will operate just as well as that of NATO," Russian President Dmitry Medvedev had said after the signing of the agreement on CRRF at the summit of the CSTO head of states in Moscow. "It will be a mobile force designed to respond to any critical developments and not only of military nature. It will be promptly used in case of any urgent necessity upon the authorisation of the Collective Security Council of the CSTO," he said.

The CRRF, permanently based in Russia, is placed under a single command, with the CSTO member-states contributing special military units. It is formed on the basis of Russia's 98th Airborne Division and the 31st Airborne Assault Brigade. In its efforts to emerge as an alternative to NATO, the CSTO also signed an agreement with the UN for creating a peacekeeping force in 2009. The member-states are in the process of forming a peace-making contingent for operations both on the territory of the CSTO member-states and, whenever necessary, beyond their boundaries on the strength of a UN mandate.

In another important development, at their top-level summit meeting in the Kremlin on December 20 in Moscow, CSTO leaders unanimously agreed that countries outside the regional security bloc will only be able to establish military bases on the territory of a member-state with the consent of all members.

"In order to deploy military bases of a third country in the territory of the CSTO member-states, it is necessary to obtain the official consent of all its members," Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev said on the 20th anniversary of the Collective Security Agreement and the 10th anniversary of the CSTO. "The decision we have made with regard to military bases of a third country is very important for the consolidation of positions within the CSTO," Medvedev said, stressing the decision was supported unanimously by all the seven member-states of CSTO. At the Moscow summit, more than three dozen items on the agenda were devoted to a greater degree of systematisation of activities within the CSTO and increasing its weight in the international arena, wrote *Rossiskaya Gazeta*.

"One of our main goals is to show in the international arena that our organization is a real, effective and capable of making a contribution to strengthening regional security, that is, in the CSTO responsibility zone and international security," Russia's envoy to the CSTO Igor Lyakin-Frolov said. "This is one of the key measures worked out by Moscow for turning the CSTO from a 'decorative structure' into a 'fully fledged military-political bloc,' whose members take into account not only their own financial benefit, but also the interests of the partners," leading Russian business daily *Kommersant* said.

The new agreement on foreign military bases on the territory of the CSTO gives Russia an opportunity to prevent the deployment of the US airbases in Tajikistan or Uzbekistan, the newspaper noted.

The tightening of rules for opening extra-regional military bases apparently does not apply to existing facilities, such as the US transit centre in Kyrgyzstan, a German air transit facility in Uzbekistan and French military aircraft based in Tajikistan.

However, the CSTO's decision on foreign military bases assumes importance in view of

Washington's reported plans to redeploy to Central Asian countries some of the forces that will be pulled out of Afghanistan in 2014. When asked what will happen now with the US military airbase at Manas in Kyrgyzstan, CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha said on the sidelines of the summit that the Kyrgyz leadership should take a decision on the issue.

Kyrgyzstan's President Almazbek Atambayev has repeatedly called for the closure of the Manas airbase when the current agreement expires in 2014.

The CSTO partners also demonstrated their solidarity with Russia by condemning the unilateral deployment of strategic missile defence systems in East Europe.

"The unilateral deployment of strategic missile defence systems by one state or a group of states without due account for the lawful interests of other countries and without extending legally-binding guarantees to the latter may damage international security and strategic stability in Europe and the world as a whole," the CSTO leaders said in a statement.

The Russian government has long opposed NATO's controversial plan of deploying the missile defence system in East Europe, arguing that the system in its "backyard" is not to secure Washington's European allies but is effectively aimed at Russia.

Moscow has also called for sharing control of any missile system, saying the aim of the so-called shield is to encircle Russia. Washington, however, refuses to share the missile shield control with any third party.

The US and NATO have also refused to sign a written guarantee requested by Russia, assuring that their system does not target Moscow.

The CSTO leaders at the summit also criticised the "growing trend for the force interference in crisis situations" by third countries. Neither Libya nor Syria was mentioned, but everybody understood which "crisis situations" were meant by the leaders of the CSTO member-states.

Recently, Russia has also been pushing for an equal and indivisible global security agreement with the participation of the CSTO and NATO. "Both the European security system represented by NATO and the post-Soviet security system represented by the CSTO are facing the same problems," said Bordyuzha at the Global Policy Forum in Yaroslavl (Russia).

"The EU and NATO are trying to influence the situation in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran, and the Arab countries," he said. Commenting on the need for a single global security, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on December 26: "We have been developing the interaction with NATO despite the remaining difficulties." "Our dialogue with NATO centered on creating an equal and indivisible security architecture in the Euro-Atlantic region. We will attain a qualitatively new level of partnership if we settle the matter taking mutual interests into account," he said.

Although the CSTO's key goal still remains to collectively assure military security, since 2005-2006, there has been a tendency to transform the CSTO into a multifunctional organization aimed at ensuring collective security through cooperation in various fields, besides the military one, as well as at countering the combined symmetric and asymmetric threats.

It is obvious that by becoming engaged in more constructive cooperation with the UN,

European security structures, CIS, SCO, EurAsEC, as well as building its own peacekeeping forces and Collective Rapid Reaction Force, the CSTO has already crossed the threshold to emerge as an important player in the construction of the new global security architecture. This is reflected in the evolving cooperation of the CSTO with the UN and by making it a "worthy competitor to NATO," as Medvedev vowed in 2009.

On November 29, ahead of the CSTO summit in Moscow in December, in the presence of Medvedev, a new radar station capable of monitoring missile launches from the North Atlantic, as well as the future European missile defence system, was put into operation in Russia's Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad.

On December 1, the radar station officially became part of the national missile early warning system, which is capable of monitoring simultaneously up to 500 targets at a distance of up to 6,000 kilometers. "I hope this station will operate well and fulfill the tasks at hand," Medvedev told the station command. The launch of a new anti-missile radar station in Kaliningrad should be treated by the West as the "first signal" of Russia's readiness to counter "threats" posed by NATO's missile defence plans, Medvedev warned.

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