

The Prospects of a New Cold War? Towards the Consolidation of the Russian-led CSTO Military Alliance

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“We are not afraid of anything, including the prospect of a new Cold War, but we don’t want one” -Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev

In his 1997 book entitled *The Grand Chessboard* American geostrategist Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote that if Russia ever attempted to launch its own defense pact, it would include, “at most”, Belarus and Tajikistan[1]. Twelve years later, his list turned out to be incomplete. Moreover, the attempts being made in order to enhance the Russian-led CSTO’s actual power projection capabilities and the efforts undertaken to bring the organization’s members closer together is something Brzezinski failed to anticipate and it seems that the latest developments concerning CSTO demonstrate that his triumphalism was premature.

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a.k.a. The Tashkent Pact, is an institutional framework created by countries from the post-Soviet space. Its charter was signed in 2002 by the Russian Federation, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia. CSTO, along with the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) and the Russia-Belarus Union State, is one of the organizations which sponsor integration efforts in the former Soviet Union. Its creation was clearly a response to NATO’s uninterrupted expansion eastward. CSTO articles include a mutual defense clause. Nevertheless, at the time, CSTO’s goal was more political than military because the organization was basically meant to prevent its members from being incorporated into NATO provided that this security pact stipulates that no member can join any other military alliance. For years, CSTO accomplished little more than conducting military exercises. This limited role was due to the fact that, back in 2002, the Russian Federation was still trying to recover from the chaos it had to deal with during the 90’s.

From Russia’s perspective, the Baltic Republics’ (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia) entry into NATO was a major cause for concern. NATO’s *Drang nach Osten* became outright frightening when the Atlantic alliance began considering NATO membership for both Georgia and Ukraine following the Rose and the Orange Revolutions, a move that was perceived as a threatening step meant to complete a military encirclement of Russia’s European and Caucasian borders. It seems that Washington has been continuously attempting to contain the emergence of Russia and China due to the fact that both could eventually challenge Western interests in the Eurasian landmass. Moscow’s fears were further heightened when the United States announced its plans to establish Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) facilities in Eastern Europe. Last but not least, Western-backed Color Revolutions broke out in Belarus,

Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan even though the latter was the only one that turned out to be successful, albeit temporarily.

In the post Soviet space, the late 2000s' geopolitical reality is different from that of the 90s because Russia is vigorously attempting to reassert its power and to reinforce its own national security. Moscow is strongly defending its interests in the so called Near Abroad, (i. e. the former Soviet Union, which is the core of Russia's long-term geostrategic plans) even if that means having to challenge Western plans if necessary. Thus, the Kremlin thinks it is vital to stop NATO expansion in order to ensure Russia's survival in the long run.

So far, Moscow has resorted to its political, diplomatic and economic power in order to prevent the Western alliance from reaching deeper into the Near Abroad. Likewise, Presidents Putin and Medvedev have also applied a great deal of pressure through Russia's vast energy leverage. Moreover, it is also possible to assert that the intelligence apparatus the Russian government operates overseas has been contributing to these plans as well. Therefore, it is logical that the Kremlin wishes to foster a higher degree of defense and military cooperation (and, ultimately, to keep NATO forces at bay) through an upgrade of CSTO now that Russian power is reemerging. It is important to highlight that, in 2007, Tashkent Pact members reached an agreement which would allow the organization's forces to be deployed on peacekeeping missions under a U.N. mandate. In fact, it managed to obtain an observer-status seat in the U.N. General Assembly.

This development is remarkable because, during its early years, CSTO was labeled by Russian officials as "loose", "fragmentary", "diffuse" and/or even as "amorphous"[2]. Taking into consideration all of the above, Moscow's need to upgrade the CSTO to forge a single defense space for much of the former Soviet Union is hardly surprising.

The aforementioned does not necessarily means that the Kremlin is about to erect an Eurasian equivalent of NATO. The idea of CSTO tanks invading Europe is simply out of touch with reality. What is perfectly clear, however, is that the Moscow does not want to see a strong NATO military presence or geopolitical influence in the post-Soviet space, much less to be attacked by the American-led alliance. Russian General Leonid Ivashov, vice-president of the Academy of Geopolitical Science, explains that there is a need "to neutralize the spread of NATO's influence not only to Central Asia but also to East and Southeast Asia... [and an institutional entity created for that purpose] won't be of an aggressive or offensive nature; it will be a deterrent." [3] He added that "...one can negotiate on equal terms only when one has at least a potential possibility of opposing one's partner or causing them unacceptable damage. Only then one can negotiate" [4], which implies that at least some Russian political heavyweights want to forge a systemic balance in which power is not exclusively monopolized (unipolarity) but one in which there are more than one center of geopolitical gravity.

Quoted by Interfax News Agency, CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha was equally outspoken when he claimed that "It is regrettable that these processes [Color Revolutions] are being encouraged from outside." He explained that "The risks associated with attempts by a number of countries to ensure their geopolitical leadership - in order to have monopoly influence on the dynamics of regional and international development - have become topical again. For these purposes, entire regions such as the Transcaucasus and Central Asia have been declared to be objects of strategic interests of out-of-the-region organizations." [5]

Taking into the account what has been discussed above, the motivation to enhance The

Tashkent Pact's military capabilities is more than clear. Just a few months ago, it was reported that CSTO will have its own Joint Rapid Reaction Force (JRRF) which could be used to protect its members from military aggression, defend critical infrastructure (strategic facilities, military bases, nuclear plants or pipeline networks) vulnerable to attack or sabotage and to carry out special operations designed to target terrorist groups as well as organized crime. Official spokesmen specified that this new branch of the CSTO "should be modern units equipped with state-of-the-art military hardware." [6] Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev emphasized that this improvement would make CSTO's JRRF "just as good as comparable NATO forces" [7]. Medvedev later explained that his country was willing to contribute the 98th Airborne Division (Ivanovo) and the 31st Air Attack Brigade (Ulyanovsk) [8]. Each of the other CSTO members is expected to contribute with at least one battalion to these armed forces. Interfax informed that Astana is seriously thinking about committing its entire elite airborne brigade to this coalition.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigoriy Karasin asserted that "in peacetime they [CSTO's JRRF] will remain placed in permanent bases. In the event of a threat of aggression to the CSTO states, as well as in order to quickly react to crisis situations, they would be redeployed to counter the threat upon the decision of the Collective Security Council of the CSTO." [9] It is noteworthy that the Russian and Kazakh governments have managed to obtain a 25% growth for CSTO's 2009 budget [10]. This strategic enhancement of CSTO is conceived to achieve actual power projection capabilities in the Near Abroad.

Last April, the BBC informed that The Joint Staff of the CSTO was working on a draft agreement concerning the main principles for the creation of a covert command and control system for the CSTO's collective security forces [11]. Tashkent Pact troops are currently under the control of their own national governments. It was announced by President Medvedev that CSTO military personnel would occasionally train together.

Furthermore, according to RIA Novosti Agency, CSTO Secretary-General told journalists during a conference held in Moscow: "We are negotiating the question of creating joint enterprises of member states of the CSTO to develop, produce, recycle, and maintain military hardware and armaments." [12] The purpose is to set common standards in order to advance interoperability. Furthermore, this will create incentives because such mechanism can engender profitable business opportunities for the Russian military-industrial complex and other defense industries from the rest of CSTO members. Russia, it must not be forgotten, is the world's second largest exporter of weapons and military technology and equipment [13]. It has also been proposed that CSTO members could be able to purchase Russian-manufactured weapons at the same price as Russia. This is clear attempt to bring national economic interests closer together.

It is vital to examine CSTO's military architecture. Its structure encompasses three different regional groupings:

- The Eastern European regional grouping, run by Russia and Belarus
- The Caucasian regional grouping, managed by Russia and Armenia
- The Central Asian regional grouping, which is an amalgam of battalions from Russia and CSTO members from Central Asia.

There are also ambitious plans to establish joint air defense systems in each of the three

regions listed above. In fact, the Russo-Belarusian air defense system is already being assembled so this military project is still in its initial stages. According to senior Russian officials, the Russo-Armenian air defense system is expected to be installed in the near future. Russian Air Force Commander Lt. Col. Aleksandr Zelin, commenting on Moscow's willingness to secure the Near Abroad's airspace, stated that "we will of course be involved in the defence of any of the CIS's member-state [should their airspace be violated]."[14] Once completed, this joint air defense system will coordinate seven air defense brigades, mobile air defense units, early warning systems, fighter aircraft, radar formations and radio-electronic warfare units.

One must always bear in mind that military cooperation is particularly difficult to achieve because it requires a shared geopolitical agenda, among other things. In a 2007 article published in the Moscow journal called *International Affairs*, this reality was acknowledged by CSTO's Secretary-General when he pledged to "...work continually to make participation in the Organization attractive for the member-states both in the military-political and economic aspects. It is inadmissible to make mistakes or to allow a vacuum to form in relations, which will be promptly filled by other forces to the detriment of our allied relations." [15] In a speech at the Opening of the International Conference of the Bergegorf Forum "The Responsibility of Russia in World Politics" Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov explained that "... not only Russia has privileged interests, primarily in relations with our closest neighbors, but the point is that our closest neighbors have the same privileged interests in Russia" [16].

For instance, Belarus and Armenia are aligned with Moscow because they regard Russia as their security guarantor. Armenia's landlocked geopolitical position is rather fragile so Yerevan thinks Russia is the only power capable of protecting Armenia from invasion which, one might add, is not a possibility that can be easily discarded due to the fact that Armenia does not trust neither Turkey nor Azerbaijan. Furthermore, the Kremlin needs to keep Yerevan as an ally in order to maintain a strong Russian presence in Transcaucasia specially if Washington and London insist on continue using Georgia as an anti-Russian spearhead. Belarus, on the other hand, is essential to protect European Russia and to maintain a presence in a country North of Ukraine so that the latter's government reconsiders its stubborn desire to join NATO.

Many analysts wonder if CSTO Central Asian members, in case of war, would be willing to participate in any campaign to defend, say, Armenia or Belarus. The truth is that the Central Asian states do not have many national interests beyond their own region. It must not be forgotten that a second element that facilitates the formation of military blocs is a common perception of threats. Thus, the Central Asian states have decided to join the Russian-led alliance because they need to preserve internal order. They fear regime-threatening factors such as militant Islamism or Color Revolutions. Moreover, they are worried about violence, clan warfare and overall instability coming from Afghanistan whose drugs exports are another destabilizing factor. Central Asian governments think those problems, if not dealt with, could easily spread throughout their territories and perhaps even engulf the whole region. There are political calculations involved as well because, for Central Asian governments, membership in a defense-oriented intergovernmental organization reinforces their domestic political position.

Moscow, needless to say, also shares these concerns so a common desire to reinforce cooperation on defense matters is comprehensible. Russian presidential advisor Sergei Prihodko expressed that CSTO military enhancement would represent "a key stabilizing

factor in the post-Soviet space.”[17] Moreover, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan think that Russia is the only power capable of and willing to defend them from foreign military intervention. The Kremlin has decided to sponsor an augmented presence of CSTO in Central Asia because it thinks it is a necessary policy in order to prevent NATO forces from using Afghanistan or other Central Asian countries as a platform to launch an attack on Russia’s Southern flank. Last but not least, those states know that Moscow’s protection is needed to ensure a regional balance of power (i.e. keep Uzbekistan in check) given that Astana, Dushanbe and Bishkek are afraid of Tashkent’s claims to regional supremacy.

Key interaction factors to be scrutinized

There is a variable that needs to be carefully analyzed to predict CSTO’s fate: Russia’s eventual negotiations with the West on a quid-pro-quo basis. The American need to diversify supply lines to NATO forces in Afghanistan has created a window of opportunity for Russia to strengthen its primacy in the post-Soviet space. Moscow could sever all its defense, trade and diplomatic ties with Iran (Syria? Venezuela?) and collaborate with NATO on supply deliveries for the Atlantic alliance’s Afghan campaign in exchange for meaningful concessions from the West. If the US agrees to meet Russian demands, the price to be paid would likely be the recognition (either official or unofficial) of the Near Abroad as Russia’s sphere of influence. This would certainly shape a set of geopolitical conditions favorable to CSTO’s ultimate consolidation.

International financial turmoil certainly cannot be taken out of the equation either. The Kremlin demonstrated that the US and the Britain are not the only ones who can manipulate financial assets in order to accomplish geopolitical objectives. Moscow knows its \$ 385 billion USD it has accumulated in gold and foreign currency reserves[18] are a very useful tool to advance its national interests. In exchange for financial assistance, the Kyrgyz government agreed to evict the Americans from Manas airbase. Lacking major oil fields and natural gas deposits, Kyrgyzstan as well as Tajikistan are states whose economies are fragile, to say the least. It is likely that Russia will employ its cash reserves in order to purchase some military and geopolitical loyalties. More importantly, this formula could be applied anywhere else within the former Soviet Union (Ukraine?). The message sent by the Russian government to other post-Soviet states is that the Eurasian power is their only suitable security provider in the region. It seems that Moscow is prepared to offer carrots for those countries willing to accept its lead. On the other hand, the Kremlin is also prepared to dispense sticks to those ready to undermine Russian interests, e.g. Georgia.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is an institution whose importance in Eurasian geopolitics cannot be neglected. Unlike CSTO or NATO, the SCO is not a mutual defense pact or a full-fledged military alliance, respectively. Nonetheless, SCO collaboration areas include security, trade, energy and even culture and education. Back in October 2007, the SCO signed an agreement with the CSTO in Dushanbe, to coordinate common efforts concerning issues such as security, crime, and drug trafficking. Along with the Russian Federation, the People’s Republic of China is the most prominent SCO member. China is not a CSTO member and, so far, nothing indicates that Beijing intends to join CSTO or that it might be invited into the alliance. On the other hand, Beijing has not expressed any visible antagonism toward CSTO either and the reverse is equally true.

Military General Staffs from China and Russia are in direct contact with one another for the first time ever. The presence of American troops and NATO forces in Central Asia makes

Beijing and Moscow uncomfortable. China does not welcome the presence of NATO forces in countries close to its Xinjiang-Uyghur autonomous region, mostly populated by Turkic Muslims. Therefore, the Russians and the Chinese think that stability in Central Asia is essential for their national security. China is also interested in Central Asian oil and gas reserves and has signed several supply agreements with countries from that region. This is something the Russians have not challenged since they know Beijing's business proposals sometimes can outbid European and American ones.

CSTO Secretary General has specified that the institution he presides over is in contact with the SCO and that the Tashkent Pact pretends to enhance collaboration between both organizations. Nikolai Bordyuzha himself confirmed his enthusiasm about this when he mentioned that "The CSTO is willing to cooperate with China on a whole spectrum of collective security challenges and issues which both China and CSTO member-states are facing.[19]" Therefore, a rising level of cooperation is to be expected and China could even help reinforce CSTO's position in Central Asia without actually becoming a member.

Challenges ahead

Nevertheless, it is impossible to deny that the Russian-led alliance faces formidable challenges. For instance, there are some political disagreements among its members. So far, Russia has not been able to obtain diplomatic recognition for Abkhazia and South Ossetia from other CSTO states. This happens because Moscow has been successful in preserving the Russian Federation's territorial integrity; other governments belonging to the CSTO do not feel so confident because they could have to deal with separatism issues at home.

There are rumors concerning The Kremlin's intention to place military bases in Abkhazia[20]. This could spark internal tensions within the Tashkent Pact because the Russian Federation is the only CSTO member to recognize Abkhazian independence. There is also the possibility that those rumors were leaked in order to weaken Mikheil Saakashvili's domestic political position and Russia might very well deny those plans or drop them altogether if Saakashvili is replaced by another Georgian ruler more pragmatic toward Russia. Georgian opposition to Saakashvili cannot be said to be pro-Russian but the Kremlin expects the next Georgian leader to be aware that it is not wise to recklessly infuriate Moscow. Therefore, all indicates that Russia would prefer a more neutral-minded government in Tbilisi. Thus, the possibility of CSTO membership for post-Saakashvili Georgia has not even been remotely discussed.

However, CSTO's biggest challenge is to keep Uzbekistan as a member. In 2001, Tashkent decided to cooperate with NATO's Afghan campaign. Uzbek President Islam Karimov even allowed the Americans to have a base on Uzbek soil, the Karshi-Khanabad airbase (a.k.a. K2). This cooperation was cancelled by Uzbekistan and US forces were eventually expelled from that facility. That decision was made by Tashkent because it suspected Western intelligence services were behind attempts to overthrow the Uzbek government via a color revolution, covert support for militant Islamism or provocation of clan warfare.

As a result, Uzbekistan sought closer ties with Russia and even joined CSTO in 2006. Nonetheless, Tashkent's foreign policy orientation is not precisely consistent because President Karimov is apparently flirting with the West once again. Uzbekistan has signed a military cooperation agreement with Azerbaijan which has a tense relation with CSTO member Armenia, to say the least. The Uzbek government stated that it will no longer

continue its participation in EurAsEC. Tashkent even considered revoking its CSTO membership. Needless to say, such move would be a blow to CSTO and could even undermine the organization's prestige ('soft power') given that it is also known as the 'Tashkent Pact.'

Russia maneuvered to keep Uzbekistan in CSTO. The Uzbek government signed the CSTO JRRF agreement with reservations. Tashkent specified it would not seek permanent participation in the JRRF project. President Karimov claimed its country's forces will only participate only after having analyzed situations case by case. It is unclear if Uzbekistan is simply trying to play great powers off against one another so it can obtain generous concessions from them. Uzbekistan feels confident because it is the most populated Central Asian state and it is not contiguous to the Russian Federation. Tashkent also knows its military and its arsenal can be used to intimidate its neighbors.

Since the Americans left the K2 airbase, many rumors have circulated about Russian intentions to readapt such military facility[21]. Such interest is quite understandable given that no Central Asian regional joint air defense system would be complete without Tashkent's participation. Access to K2 would grant CSTO collective forces a sound military responsiveness in Central Asia, not just in Uzbekistan.

Potential expansion westward: the case of Ukraine

From Moscow's viewpoint, the Ukraine is probably the most geopolitically important country in the Near Abroad. Due to its geographic position, economic potential and demographic structure, Ukraine's strategic value is undeniable. Therefore, the Orange Revolution and the project to bring Ukraine into NATO were seen as an attack on Russia's core interests. It is not surprising that bringing Ukraine back into the Russian sphere of influence ranks high in the Kremlin's to-do list. Even if Viktor Yushchenko's successor is not pro-Russian, the Kremlin would certainly be willing to seduce a more pragmatic leader so that Ukraine enters Russian-sponsored organizations like the Union State of Russia and Belarus, EurAsEC or the Tashkent Pact itself.

Indeed, Nikolai Bordyuzha, CSTO Secretary-General, expressed that "This [the prospect of Ukraine joining CSTO] would be extremely desirable because however the processes in the post-Soviet space are going in the recent times, today we are in the same security space with Ukraine"[22]. Such incorporation would greatly enhance Russian and CSTO hard power projection capabilities. For instance, on Ukrainian soil there are early warning facilities as well as space-monitoring radars capable of tracking a high number of trajectories. Moreover, Russian access to the Black Sea would be ensured because a pro-Russian government in Kiev would allow Moscow to retain its naval base in Sevastopol as well as other defense facilities located in the rest of the Crimean Peninsula. Thus, CSTO's Eastern European regional Grouping would then encompass Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.

CSTO membership for Ukraine would fuel deep repercussions all over the former Soviet Union and beyond. It would be both a geopolitical catalyst and a force multiplier that will certainly contribute to CSTO's solidification. Such event could make Uzbekistan and the rest of Central Asia seek an increased level of strategic and defense cooperation with Moscow. Turkmenistan, for instance, could reconsider its foreign policy orientation as a result thereof and Moscow would probably try to persuasively convince Ashgabat to join the Tashkent Pact. Any further CSTO expansion is not viable unless Ukraine is to be accepted in the Russian-led defense pact first. That would mean that Russian efforts to stop NATO

expansion were ultimately successful. Under those conditions, even Poland might rethink its staunchly anti-Russian stance given that CSTO could reach its Eastern border.

Therefore, CSTO membership for Ukraine is very much on the Russian-led alliance's agenda because it would boost its hard and soft power alike. One can reasonably assume that accession procedures will start if/when regime change takes place in Kiev.

Further expansion westward? The case of Serbia

Viktor Ozerov, director of the Russian Federation's Council Committee for Defense and Security, raised more than a few eyebrows when he declared that "in case Serbia remains in a greater isolation on the part of European states and the international community as regards the recognition of Kosovo, we will probably have to review the CSTO charter and consider Serbia's admission to these organizations." [23] CSTO Secretary-General Nikolai Bordiuzha noted that "there is the procedure of accession to the Collective Security Treaty Organization; the interstate legal base has been tested as Uzbekistan restores its membership in the CSTO." [24] However, the organization's Secretariat informed that, so far, Belgrade has not sent any membership application.

There are several reasons why Serbia could be considered as a CSTO potential member. From Russia's perspective, Serbia is populated by fellow Slavs. Moreover, Russia and Serbia have been allies in both peacetime and wartime. The Russian Federation was opposed to NATO's 1999 air campaign against Serbia but, at the time, it was not strong enough to stop it. It is interesting to note that the Serbians reciprocated by allowing Russian experts to examine the wreckage of a F-117 Nighthawk stealth fighter that was shot down [25].

Moscow is the most outspoken critic of diplomatic recognition granted to Kosovo by several Western powers. In fact, Russian support for Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence is seen by many analysts as payback for NATO backing for Kosovo's independence. One also has to bear in mind that Gazprom owns 51% of NIS (Petroleum Industry of Serbia) shares and that the Russian energy behemoth plans to include Serbia in the South Stream pipeline project and to establish a gas storage facility in Banatski Dvor.

Therefore, it is not surprising at all that there are some pro-Russian factions within Serbia's political elite. For example, in 1999 the parliament of the then Republic of Yugoslavia voted for the country to join the Union State of Russia and Belarus. In 2007, Serbian politician Tomislav Nikolic endorsed such proposal and he added that the purpose of such maneuver would be "stand[ing] up against the hegemony of America and the European Union." [26] It is interesting that those remarks were made after having met with Russian Ambassador Aleksandr Alekseyev. During his 2008 presidential campaign, Nikolic stressed that, if elected, his administration would be willing to host a Russian military base on Serbian soil [27]. However, he was defeated by pro-Western candidate Boris Tadic.

Taking the aforementioned into consideration, it is not far-fetched to suspect that one of the reasons behind the West's determination to break Serbia into pieces is the desire to prevent Moscow from ever regaining any meaningful presence in the Balkans.

The Kremlin's strategists think Western policymakers consider Serbia as a small scale version of Russia and that the Balkanization model applied to disintegrate Serbia could be implemented somewhere else to dismantle other countries' territorial integrity (Iran? Pakistan? China? Russia?). No wonder Moscow is concerned about this given the number of

similarities shared by both Serbia and Russia.

Both Moscow and Belgrade regard NATO as a hostile alliance attempting to surround them. Unlike Russia, Serbia has already been encircled by NATO which makes it very vulnerable if the Atlantic alliance invades it. Moreover, Serbia has lost access to the Adriatic and, as a result, is nowadays a landlocked country.

Belgrade has a policy of military neutrality and the Serbian government has stated that it will not seek membership in any military bloc. Nevertheless, Serbia has signed agreements with both NATO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization even though the latter cannot be defined as a military alliance. There is another obstacle for Serbian CSTO membership: Serbia is not located in the post-Soviet space, the area CSTO has been primarily designed for.

Furthermore, Serbia's current government is largely seen as pro-Western. Serbian pro-Russian opposition remains politically fragmented and it seems President Tadic's government is committed to bring Serbia into the European Union. Nevertheless, it cannot be taken for granted that such foreign policy orientation will be permanent. It is not even clear if Brussels is willing to embrace Serbia as a EU member.

A letter (which was posted by the Centre for Research on Globalization website[28] barely a year ago) sent in 2000 to former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder by Bundestag member Willy Wimmer reveals that, in a conference organized by the US State Department and the American Enterprise Institute in Bratislava, it was told that "Serbia (probably for the purposes of securing an unhindered US military presence) must be permanently excluded from European development." Mr. Wimmer adds that "the conference was attended by very high level political officials, as witnessed by the presence of a large number of prime ministers, as well as foreign ministers and defense ministers from the region."

There is another possibility that cannot be ignored. Pro-Western Tadic might seek closer with Russia given the current circumstances Serbia is under. Last March he stated "We are prepared for comprehensive military technical cooperation with Russia and are open for all suggestions"[29]. He also emphasized Serbia's need to modernize its weaponry and that energy cooperation with Moscow will serve Serbian national interests. Tadic added that financial assistance from Russia is an option that is being considered.

In short, it is understandable that Serbia is often mentioned as a potential CSTO member. Geopolitically speaking, it does make sense. However, it depends on a number of variables whose future behavior cannot be predicted with a high degree of accuracy. CSTO has more important priorities on its agenda (read Ukraine). CSTO membership for Serbia could become conceivable only if/after those priorities are completed.

Potential expansion southward: The case of Turkmenistan

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkmenistan sought to distance itself from Moscow. Ashgabat decided to follow a policy of neutrality and it did not reach out to NATO or the Russian-lead regional organizations, including CSTO. An American request to place a military base on Turkmen soil was denied. Furthermore, the Turkmen know their valuable oil and gas deposits naturally attract several foreign powers, namely the US, Europe, Russia, China and other East Asian countries.

Both the Americans and the Europeans have urged Turkmenistan to join the Nabucco pipeline project, designed to diversify the EU's gas supply away from Russia. Nevertheless, neither Saparmurat Niyazov (a.k.a. 'Turkmenbashi') nor his successor Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov voiced a strong enthusiasm for such proposal. On the other hand, Moscow needs to court Ashgabat so that the former can control Turkmen gas exports in order to preserve its upper hand vis-à-vis European consumers, which depend on Russian supplies.

Turkmenistan has cleverly manipulated the option of energy cooperation with the West as a tool to extract concessions from Moscow. Ashgabat has also signed energy supply agreements with Beijing (eager to protect its energy security) in order to avoid an excessive dependence on Russia. However, the Turkmen government has been closely monitoring the latest geopolitical developments that have taken place in the post-Soviet space and it looks it does not want to alienate Russian interests as a result of Russia's regained assertiveness.

On the other hand, Russia does not want the Turkmen government to be undermined by Islamic militants for the same reason such scenario is undesirable anywhere else in Central Asia. A successful takeover by Islamic militants in Ashgabat (or in any other Central Asian capital for that matter) could give NATO forces an excuse to intervene either politically or otherwise. Turkmenistan's government feels threatened by groups of militant Islamists connected to international wahabbism. The Islamic insurgents Ashgabat fears the most are the Islamic Party of Turkestan and Hizb ut-Tahrir. Both are strongly committed to instigating Islamic revolution throughout Central Asia by overthrowing the region's authoritarian albeit secular governments. It is noteworthy that Hizb ut-Tahrir is not catalogued as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the US even though it is banned in Turkey and Egypt whose governments are largely pro-American.

Another event Turkmenistan fears is a color revolution on its own soil. Ashgabat knows they have broken out in the Caucasus, Eastern Europe and, more worryingly, in Central Asia (one took place in Kyrgyzstan and a second one failed in Uzbekistan). The Turkmen know that the possibility of regime-changing color revolutions being encouraged and supported by Western interests is very real and the Turkmen government, therefore, is taking measures to ensure Western NGO's and foundations cannot induce such a process in Turkmenistan.

Turkmenistan knows its geopolitical position is delicate. Ashgabat does not trust two of its neighbors (i.e. Uzbekistan and Iran) and an invasion by either is a possibility Turkmen planners cannot afford to ignore because both Uzbeks and Persians are suspected of having an ambitious and perhaps even an expansionist agenda in Central Asia which could be detrimental to Turkmen interests and maybe even to the country's territorial integrity. Additionally, Turkmenistan is also afraid of a potential incursion by Western powers eager to take over Turkmen energy resources and to maintain their military presence in Central Asia. The Turkmen regime wants to make sure a coup or clan warfare, with or without the involvement of Western intelligence agencies, do not take place.

Russia shares those very same concerns because it wants to make sure stability prevails in Turkmenistan. Indeed, in 2006 CSTO Foreign Ministers Council discussed events taking place in Turkmenistan because they were worried that Turkmenbashi's death could spark a succession crisis. Back then, Nikolay Bordyuzha, CSTO Secretary-General "We have been instructed to closely watch the situation in Turkmenistan and to brief our heads of state virtually immediately to enable them to take appropriate political decisions, if needed."

Moreover, it must not be overlooked that Ashgabat is an importer of Russian-made weapons and military hardware. Once all of the above is taken into consideration, it is not unthinkable for Turkmenistan to reorient its foreign policy and chose closer ties with Russia, either forced by necessity or willingly. For instance, if Ukraine returns to the Russian orbit and is later incorporated into CSTO, Ashgabat will see that as evidence that Moscow is really capable of reestablishing its geopolitical empowerment in the Near Abroad. Thus, that could lead Turkmenistan to abandon its previous neutrality and to align more closely with Russia instead. Therefore, even though an eventual Turkmen membership in CSTO has not been mentioned by both sides, it is an option which might be officially explored in the not-so-distant future.

Further expansion southward? The case of Iran

Iran has been busy trying to court Russia and China in order to increase profitable business opportunities and, more importantly, to associate itself with two great powers hoping that the Americans think twice about attacking Iran given that there are Chinese and Russian interests in Persia. It is possible to assume that one of the reasons Washington has not attacked Iran is because American planners fear such conflagration might dangerously escalate if Moscow and/or Beijing get involved in one way or another. It does not seem that the Americans (or the Israelis) have conclusively discarded their plans for an attack on Iran.

In 2008, Iran requested to be admitted as a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. So far, it is unknown what the SCO's response will consist of. One year earlier, The Tashkent Pact's Secretary-General mentioned that "CSTO is an open organization. If Iran applies in accordance with our charter, we will consider the application." [30] Last April, he stated that "Iran is actually taking part in the operations carried out within the framework of the CSTO, but the question of Iran's readiness to join the organization has not been raised, although we can see a certain interest by the Iranian side." [31] He added that "Expanding cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Iran is our pleasure... [because] we can only appreciate that many countries, including Iran, are interested in CSTO activity. The more countries that join the CSTO missions, the higher level of security we will ensure." [32]

However, neither the Russians nor other CSTO members would be willing and/or ready to go to war with NATO armies to repel an attack on Iran. The potential consequences of such involvement are unpredictable. It has to be pointed out that a military alliance, in order to safeguard its credibility, must have a serious defense guarantee. So far, it has been observed that Russian security guarantees are serious in the Near Abroad, as shown by Moscow's intervention to protect South Ossetia from an attack launched by Georgia's Saakashvili. The overall credibility of a military alliance becomes unclear if it incorporates a country which is logistically and politically difficult to defend from external aggression because overextending beyond its capabilities would actually diminish its operational readiness. That is precisely what NATO has done.

Iran is not located in the post-Soviet space; nevertheless, Turkmenistan (its Northern neighbor) is even though the latter is not a CSTO member (yet?). Therefore, Iran could be seriously considered for CSTO membership only if Turkmenistan were to be incorporated beforehand. Russia, it must not be forgotten, is the world's top land power and even if Moscow were to protect Iran militarily, any Russian military deployment in Persia would be complicated because Iran does not border any CSTO member state except for Armenia.

Even if Ashgabat decides to join CSTO at some point in the future, it is unlikely at this time

for Iran to enter CSTO because the because potential risks outweigh potential benefits; that is specially true for the Russian Federation, the political and military pillar of CSTO.

Russia, the very cornerstone of CSTO, has several interests in Iran. For instance, Teheran is a purchaser of Russian-made weapons. Moreover, the Iranian nuclear program would not have advanced without Moscow's involvement. Last but not least, the Persians and the Russians have been involved in bilateral talks concerning their common interest in establishing a 'gas OPEC.'

The Kremlin's foreign policy toward Iran can be seen as retaliation directed to the West for the latter's support for anti-Russian regimes and movements in the Near Abroad. If NATO really wants Russia to disengage itself from Iran, then the price Washington and Brussels will have to pay is none other than the recognition of the Russian Federation as the 'first among equals' in the former Soviet Union, which is Russia's area of "privileged interests".

However, if the West is reluctant to exchange bargaining chips and decides to attack Iran anyway, Moscow has prepared a contingency plan to take advantage of such recklessness. If such campaign ever takes place, it will absorb a massive amount of resources (money, manpower, political capital and, above all, time). That will open a window of opportunity for the Kremlin to advance further its interests in the Near Abroad while NATO armies are trapped in Iran.

In short, the possibility of Iranian membership in the Tashkent Pact is remote because, for CSTO in general and Russia in particular, the political and military stakes are considerably high.

Conclusion

The Tashkent Pact was established as a political reaction to NATO expansion. An outcome of Russia's resurgence is Moscow's determination to advance a military upgrade of CSTO in order to improve the organization's military capabilities in the post-Soviet space.

The potential to enhance this strategic cooperation mechanism is provided by the fact that other CSTO members share a common perception of threats albeit their concerns are limited to their own regions. Armenian interests do not go far beyond the Caucasus; Belarus' focus is its Eastern European neighborhood; Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan desire to preserve regional security in Central Asia and Russia needs to strengthen its position in all of the Near Abroad so it can fully reemerge as a transcontinental power.

On the other hand, the Kremlin does not pretend to use CSTO to attack NATO; it just intends to prevent the Atlantic alliance from reaching further (in geopolitical and military terms) into Russia's sphere of influence. It is thus logical to assume that NATO will do everything in its power to derail CSTO improvement, let alone its potential expansion.

However, the alliance must address several issues to ensure its political cohesiveness. Keeping Uzbekistan as a member is a challenge CSTO leaders will not neglect. Bringing Ukraine into the Russian orbit and particularly into CSTO will solidify the Tashkent Pact so this incorporation is very much on said organization's agenda. An eventual Turkmen CSTO membership is not a far-fetched scenario since it could provide meaningful benefits for both parties. Turkmenistan's entry will also help consolidate CSTO militarily, politically and

geostrategically.

It must be borne in mind that the former Soviet Union is the geographic area for which CSTO was designed. No other country outside of the post-Soviet space can be seriously considered for membership at this point because the Tashkent's Pact top priority is to achieve its consolidation in the Near Abroad. If the organization were to send any membership invitations, the likeliest candidates would be Ukraine and Turkmenistan.

Only time will tell if the CSTO is ultimately successful in keeping the Russians in, NATO out, the Uzbeks quiet and Color Revolutions down in much of the post-Soviet space.

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