

Activities of the Collective Security Treaty Organization in Central Asia (2002–2022)

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Abstract. The article identifies the contribution of the Collective Security Treaty Organization in Central Asia (CSTO) to the process of ensuring security in Central Asia. Conceptual approaches to the CSTO in the foreign policy of the Russian Federation and its allies in the region are analyzed. The documents of the CSTO are examined, as well as its practical activities to ensure regional security, prevent military threats, combat extremism, and terrorism and drug trafficking. The peacekeeping activities of the CSTO are examined. At the same time, an answer is given to the question why the CSTO did not deploy a peacekeeping mission at the request of Kyrgyzstan during the unrest in 2010, but responded to a similar request from Kazakhstan during the January events of 2022.

Keywords: international relations, Collective Security Treaty Organizations, Russian Federation, Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, regional security

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Introduction

In mid-May 2022, the Collective Security Treaty turned 30 years old and the Organization created on its basis turned twenty years old. During this time, she, as noted by the participants of the anniversary summit of the CSTO on May 16, 2022,

It has raised the cooperation of the member states to a qualitatively new level of allied relations, accumulated significant potential to counter a wide range of modern challenges and threats, and has become an important factor of peace and stability in the Euro-Asian space¹.

All these years, the CSTO has been most active in Central Asia. Half of the organization's members are subjects of this region: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. There are many security threats in the region, both military and new - terrorism, illegal migration, drug trafficking. In addition, at the beginning of the 21st century, the "Second Great Game" unfolded here - the geopolitical rivalry of significant political actors. Over the years, regional security has been strongly influenced by the Afghan factor.

The activities of the CSTO have been discussed in various scientific works. Its former General Secretary N.N.Bordyuzha in the article "Security will be reliably ensured by coordination and cooperation" [2] describes the formation of the organization and sums up the results of the first five years of its existence. K.E.Meshcheryakov in his work "Integration processes in the post-Soviet space and Russia's participation in them" [5] examines the emergence and development of the CSTO until 2012 in the context of Eurasian integration. A.Ya.Babadzhanov in the monograph "Military-Political Cooperation of Post-Soviet States: The Problem of Compatibility of National Approaches" [1] explores, among other issues, the functioning of the CSTO until 2014. E.F.Troitsky and V.P.Zinoviev in the article "Organization of the Treaty on collective security: formation, evolution and crisis of the military-political alliance" [6] analyze the complexities of the development of the CSTO until 2018. A.V.Kornilenko in his work "The Peacekeeping Potential of the Collective Security Treaty Organization" [3] reveals the potential capabilities of peacekeeping operations that have not yet been implemented in 2020.

However, none of the above-mentioned works specifically examines the activities of the CSTO in Central Asia or analyzes the different attitudes towards the organization among various subjects of the region. The studies do not extend to 2022 and do not compare decisions on the CSTO peacekeeping operation in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in 2010 and 2022. This article is devoted to these issues.

¹ Statement by the Collective Security Council of the Collective Security Treaty Organization on the Occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the Collective Security Treaty and the 20th Anniversary of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Available from: <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/5800>

Materials and methods

Documents of the CSTO and its structural divisions, as well as the Foreign Policy Concept of the Organization's member countries were used as research sources.

The methodological basis was a geopolitical analysis that allows us to identify the significance of Central Asia for the CSTO in general and for Russia in particular. Firstly, this region is a junction of three civilizations, the Russian, Chinese and Islamic worlds [7:226]. Secondly, there are significant reserves of natural resources, primarily hydrocarbons. Thirdly, Central Asia has an important transit significance, which is increasing as the Chinese "One Belt, One Road" project is implemented. And fourthly, by taking control of this region or creating chaos in it, countries unfriendly to Russia can create problems for its security, given that Russia and Central Asia have the longest land border in the world.

According to the official position of the Russian Foreign Ministry,

for Russia, Central Asia is a zone of historically determined interests, an important partner in cooperation in the military-political, trade-economic, cultural and humanitarian spheres, as well as in ensuring the general security of the Eurasian states from the south².

The CSTO is the main instrument for maintaining security in this region and establishing relations between Russia and its allies in Central Asia. The importance of the organization increases as threats to regional security increase due to the strengthening of the Afghan factor in regional life after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The study used a historical research method, which allows us to consider the activities of the CSTO in Central Asia in development, to identify changes at different stages. The institutional method was also used to analyze the structure of the organization. Comparative analysis made it possible to compare the approaches of various member countries to the organization, the role of the CSTO in events in Central Asia in 2010 and 2022, and to identify the reasons for its changes.

Results

The role and place of the CSTO in the Foreign Policy Concepts of Russia and Central Asian countries

The CSTO occupies an important place in Russian foreign policy in general and regional policy in Central Asia in particular. Article 52 of the penultimate Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation dated November 30, 2016 emphasized that

² Russia and Central Asia. Official website of the Russian Foreign Ministry. Available from: <https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/rossia-i-problemy-central-noj-azii>

Russia considers the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as one of the most important elements of the modern security system in the post-Soviet space. Russia stands for the qualitative development of the CSTO, its transformation into an authoritative multifunctional international organization capable of confronting modern challenges and threats under the increasing influence of diverse global and regional factors in the CSTO area of responsibility and adjacent areas³.

And in the new, sixth Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation dated March 31, 2023, the CSTO is mentioned four times, which underlines the even greater importance of the Organization at the present stage. In particular, article 49 states that

To transform the near abroad into a zone of peace, good neighborliness, sustainable development and prosperity, the Russian Federation intends to give priority attention to: ... ensuring guaranteed protection of Russia, its allies and partners in any development of the military-political situation in the world, strengthening the regional security system based on the principle of indivisibility security and the key role of Russia in maintaining and strengthening regional security, the complementarity of the Union State, the CSTO and other formats of interaction between Russia and its allies and partners in the field of defense and security⁴.

Tajikistan also highly appreciates the role of the CSTO. In his current Foreign Policy Concept dated January 27, 2015, in the section "Multilateral Diplomacy" it is noted that

The Republic of Tajikistan considers expanding interaction with its partners in strengthening national and state security as one of the priorities of its foreign policy and considers its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to meet national interests. The activities of the Republic of Tajikistan within the framework of this Organization are aimed at creating effective mechanisms to counter the threats of the modern world. In this context, the country's membership in the Organization is considered as one of the important factors in ensuring the country's security and maintaining stability in the region⁵.

If we turn to the Foreign Policy Concepts of other CSTO allies in Central Asia, we see a different picture. The CSTO is mentioned in passing among other organizations. The Concept of Foreign Policy of Kyrgyzstan dated March 11, 2019 considers the CSTO with

³ The concept of the Foreign policy of the Russian Federation (approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin on November 30, 2016). Available from: https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248

⁴ The concept of the Foreign policy of the Russian Federation (approved by the President of the Russian Federation V.V.Putin on March 31, 2023) Available from: <https://www.mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1860586/>

⁵ Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Tajikistan. Available from: <https://www.mfa.tj/en/main/view/988/concept-of-the-foreign-policy-of-the-republic-of-tajikistan>

restraint when speaking about the development of relations with various international organizations. The section “Foreign Policy Priorities” states that

in order to promote national interests, assist in ensuring national and regional security and solving socio-economic problems, the Kyrgyz Republic actively interacts with others countries within the framework of the United Nations, the Eurasian Economic Union, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Commonwealth of Independent States, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, Economic Cooperation Organization and other international organizations⁶.

But if Kyrgyzstan views the CSTO on a par with other Eurasian integration structures - the EAEU and the SCO, then Kazakhstan puts the CSTO and NATO on the same level. His Foreign Policy Concept for 2020-2030, adopted on March 6, 2020, lists priorities in regional and multilateral diplomacy as

continuing the course to expand cooperation with multilateral organizations in the field of politics and security in Europe and Eurasia - the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Council of Europe, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and other institutions⁷.

Russia's approach is quite logical, because as the initiator of the creation of the CSTO and the driver of Eurasian integration processes, it relies on the organization in its regional policy. As the center of the regional subsystem of international relations, Russia is responsible for the security of not only its territory, but also the territories of its allied states.

The high assessment of the Organization in the Tajik Foreign Policy Concept is largely explained by the Afghan factor and the increased security threats in connection with this. Shortly before its adoption, the ISAF coalition group was withdrawn from Afghanistan⁸, what caused the Taliban movement to intensify⁹, and the influx of so-called militants “Islamic State” into the country¹⁰. At the same time, in the year the Concept was adopted,

⁶ The concept of the foreign policy of the Kyrgyz Republic. Website of the Ministry of Justice of the Kyrgyz Republic. Available from: <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/430045>

⁷ Concept of the foreign policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020-2030. Available from: https://www.akorda.kz/en/legal_acts/decrees/on-the-concept-of-the-foreign-policy-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-for-2020-2030

⁸ The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) is a NATO-led international military contingent operating in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014.

⁹ *The organization has been recognized as a terrorist organization by the Supreme Court of Russia. The unified federal list of organizations, including foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation (as of April 25, 2023). Available from: <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/npd/terror.htm>, 18+

¹⁰ *The organization was declared a terrorist organization by the Supreme Court of Russia. The unified federal list of organizations, including foreign and international ones, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation (as of April 25, 2023). Available from: <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/npd/terror.htm>, 18+

the state banned the only legal Islamist party in the region - the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan¹¹, which aggravated the difficult security situation in the country. It was during the 2015 Dushanbe CSTO summit that members of this party attempted an armed rebellion, but Tajikistan received full support from the Organization.

The cold attitude of Kyrgyzstan towards the CSTO in official documents is apparently a consequence of the Organization's refusal to respond to the acting request. Interim President Roza Otunbayeva deployed a peacekeeping mission in the south of Kyrgyzstan during the unrest and ethnic clashes in 2010. On the eve of the adoption of the Kyrgyz Foreign Policy Concept of 2019, the CSTO experienced its first serious crisis caused by the destructive actions of the Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan. He initiated criminal proceedings against CSTO Secretary General Yuri Khachaturov for his participation in the crackdown on the Armenian opposition ten years earlier. As a result, in November 2018, Yu.G.Khachaturov terminated his powers ahead of schedule, after which there was no Secretary General in the CSTO for more than a year.

Kazakhstan, unlike Kyrgyzstan, received CSTO peacekeeping assistance in 2022, but its Foreign Policy Concept was adopted earlier, in 2020. At that time, the Republic pointedly emphasized its multi-vector nature. This was facilitated by the adoption in 2019 of new Strategies for Central Asia by both the United States of America¹² and the European Union¹³. Both actors traditionally began implementing the strategy from Kazakhstan. A month before the adoption of the Foreign Policy Concept, US Secretary of State M. Pompeo paid a visit to the Republic. It is obvious that if the Concept had been adopted after January 2022, the description of the Organization and its mention would have been different. This is evidenced by the speeches of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev after the completion of the CSTO peacekeeping operation.

Institutionalization of the CSTO and expansion of its activities in Central Asia

On May 15, 1992, a Collective Security Treaty was signed between the former Soviet republics, and on May 14, 2002, on its basis, the CSTO international organization was created, which, along with Russia, Belarus and Armenia, also included three Central Asian republics - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Article 3 of the CSTO Charter, adopted at the Moscow summit on October 7, 2002, stated that

¹¹ *The organization was declared a terrorist organization by the Supreme Court of Russia. The unified federal list of organizations, including foreign and international ones, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation (as of April 25, 2023). Available from: <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/npd/terror.htm>, 18+

¹² United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity. Available from: <https://www.state.gov/united-states-strategy-for-central-asia-2019-2025-advancing-sovereignty-and-economic-prosperity/>

¹³ Council conclusions on the New EU Strategy on Central Asia. Available from: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39778/st10221-en19.pdf>

the goals of the Organization are to strengthen peace, international and regional security and stability, protect on a collective basis the independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of member states, in achieving which the member states give priority to political means¹⁴.

As K.E.Meshcheryakov emphasized,

Russia and its allies created a new military-political bloc - the first such association with the participation of Moscow that arose after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact Organization [5:68].

Soon, to strengthen the position of the CSTO in the region, at the suggestion of Russia, the Collective Rapid Deployment Forces of the Central Asian Region were reformed. It is interesting that these forces were created even before the creation of the organization itself, in August 2001, “to participate in repelling external military aggression and conducting joint counter-terrorism operations”¹⁵. Since 2003, the new Russian air base in the Kyrgyz city of Kant has become their most important component. In the same year, Russia initiated the signing, within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Community, of a multilateral Treaty “On cooperation in protecting the external borders of the EurAsEC member states,” since all member countries of this organization were simultaneously members of the CSTO.

According to the fair opinion of Murad Laumulin, an analyst at the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies,

at the initial stage, the CSTO was perceived as a structure based on the Russian military platform (training of officers, provision of Russian weapons and military equipment, joint exercises), like a military organization. However, the goal was soon set to turn it into a universal security institution [4:70–71].

In Central Asia, the CSTO soon began to fight new threats: drug trafficking, organized crime, terrorism, illegal migration. At the same time, according to E.F.Troitsky and V.P.Zinoviev,

Russia has made considerable efforts to develop the regulatory framework and institutional superstructure of the organization. In 2004, the CSTO Joint Headquarters began work. In 2005, within the framework of the CSTO, an agreement was signed on the training of military personnel, providing for the training of military personnel free of charge for the sending party in a number of military educational institutions of the remaining participating countries [6: 339–340].

¹⁴ The Charter of the Collective Security Treaty Organization / Ivanov I. S. Russia in the modern world. Answers to the challenges of the 21st century. Moscow: Olma-Press. 2004. Applications:553.

¹⁵ Collective rapid deployment forces of the Central Asian Region of Collective Security. The website of the CSTO Joint Staff. Available from: <https://www.jscsto.org/security/crdf-car/>

In 2006, the Organization expanded: Uzbekistan joined it after the Andijan events. After this, the CSTO initiated rapprochement and coordination with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. At the Dushanbe SCO summit on October 5, 2007, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the secretariats of the SCO and the CSTO. The document defined ways of equal and constructive interaction

in matters of ensuring regional and international security and stability; counter terrorism; combating drug trafficking; suppression of illegal arms trafficking; combating organized transnational crime; other areas of mutual interest¹⁶.

Unfortunately, in 2012, Uzbekistan suspended its membership in the Organization, as it wanted to gain room for maneuver in cooperation with the West, mainly with the United States, due to the intensification of the Afghan problem [9: 10627]. However, even before this, a major change took place in the structure of the CSTO. On June 14, 2009, the Agreement on the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces was signed, which were designed to intensify military-tactical integration¹⁷. Soon after this, the CSTO states began to conduct regular joint anti-terrorism exercises and anti-drug operations in Central Asia.

Peacekeeping activities of the CSTO in Central Asia

Military cooperation within the Organization, being a priority for the participants, was carried out in several areas, including in the field of CSTO peacekeeping forces, as noted by the former Secretary General of the organization N.N.Bordyuzha [8] At the same time, according to A.V.Kornilenko, The Organization's lack of practice in conducting real peacekeeping operations was compensated by practicing operational and combat skills in annual exercises. To practice the tasks, training grounds were used in Chebarkul (Chelyabinsk region of the Russian Federation), Mulino (Nizhny Novgorod region of the Russian Federation), Kharb-Maidon (Tajikistan), Balykchy (Issyk-Kul region of Kyrgyzstan), as well as the training ground of the Sverdlovsk training center of the Central Military District of the Russian Federation [3:710–711].

In 2010, there was a real chance to test the peacekeeping potential of the CSTO in action. In April, the second coup in the history of Kyrgyzstan took place, during which President Kurmanbek Bakiev was overthrown and fled the country. The winners formed a provisional government headed by Interim President Roza Otunbayeva. Soon, in the south of the Republic, in Osh, Osh and Jalal-Abad regions, violent interethnic clashes occurred that lasted five days, in which, according to official data, more than four hundred people were killed. More than 400 thousand Uzbeks fled to the territory of Uzbekistan. Roza Otunbaeva appealed to the CSTO with a request to launch a peacekeeping operation in the south of

¹⁶ Cooperation with international organizations. The official website of the CSTO. Available from: https://odkb-csto.org/international_org/sco/

¹⁷ Agreement on the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces of the Collective Security Treaty Organization dated June 14, 2009. Available from: http://www.conventions.ru/view_base.php?id=1376

Kyrgyzstan, but was refused. This allowed critics both inside and outside the organization to question its viability.

However, 12 years later, during the unrest in Kazakhstan, the CSTO acted differently in a similar situation. On the evening of January 5, 2022, the President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev turned to the Organization with a request for help, and immediately received consent. The CSTO Collective Security Council adopted a decision “on the dispatch of Collective Peacekeeping Forces to the Republic of Kazakhstan for a limited period in order to stabilize and normalize the situation in the country”¹⁸.

By January 9, 2022, the deployment of peacekeeping forces was completed. Russian troops, who formed the backbone of the peacekeeping contingent, took control of the Almaty airport, the Russian Consulate General and a number of social infrastructure facilities (television centers, water supply companies, etc.). The Belarusian contingent guarded the Zhetysay military airfield and the military arsenal in the city of Kapshagai. Kyrgyz military personnel took custody of thermal power plant-2 in Almaty, and Tajik military personnel took custody of thermal power plant-1. The Armenian contingent provided security for the Aksai bakery plant. The CSTO peacekeeping forces stabilized the situation in Kazakhstan and allowed law enforcement officers of the Republic to stop the unrest. January 13, 2022 at the request of K-Zh. Tokayev began the withdrawal of peacekeepers, which lasted until January 19 of this year.

When comparing these two situations, five reasons were identified why the CSTO decided to launch a peacekeeping operation in Kazakhstan in 2022, although it did not do so in Kyrgyzstan in 2010.

1. The CSTO Charter, in force in mid-2010, strictly limited the deployment of collective peacekeeping forces, allowing it only under the threat of an external military invasion. This legally prevented the CSTO from intervening in the situation in southern Kyrgyzstan. That same year, on December 10, the Charter was adjusted. At the beginning of 2022, it contained clauses that allowed a peacekeeping operation to be carried out legally, even if foreign troops did not attack. In particular, it was stated that

To achieve the goals of the Organization, member states take joint measures to form within its framework an effective collective security system that ensures collective protection in the event of a threat to security, stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty¹⁹.

2. Interim President Roza Otunbaeva addressed the CSTO from Kyrgyzstan. She represented the self-proclaimed government that came to power through a coup d'état. The legitimate President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, elected in 2019, addressed the CSTO from Kazakhstan.

¹⁸ Commentary from the CSTO Secretariat on the situation in Kazakhstan CSTO website. Available from: https://odkb-csto.org/news/news_odkb/kommentariy-sekretariata-odkb-o-situatsii-v-kazakhstane/#loaded

¹⁹ Charter of the Collective Security Treaty Organization of October 7, 2002 (with amendments by the Protocol on Amendments to the Charter of the Collective Security Treaty Organization of October 7, 2002, signed on December 10, 2010). Available from: https://odkb-csto.org/documents/documents/ustav_organizatsii_dogovora_o_kollektivnoy_bezopasnosti_/#loaded

3. Clashes and pogroms in the south of Kyrgyzstan occurred spontaneously, while government buildings and social infrastructure were not purposefully destroyed, as in Kazakhstan, and airports were not captured. There was serious preparation and organization of unrest in Kazakhstan, and, consequently, there was a greater threat to the security and stability of the state.

4. The deployment of troops to Kyrgyzstan in 2010 could have further aggravated interethnic strife, since Uzbekistan was also a member of the CSTO at that time. There was no confrontation on national grounds in Kazakhstan.

5. The international background in 2010 was not conducive to the movements of Russian and CSTO troops. This was the height of the “reset” policy with the United States shortly after the signing of the START III treaty. In 2022, on the contrary, it was necessary to show the United States and NATO after the December 2021 ultimatum that Russia and its allies act quickly and decisively in their area of their responsibility.

Conclusion

Thus, despite the versatility of the CSTO's activities in various regions of the post-Soviet space, the focus of the organization was security issues in Central Asia. This was reflected in the documents of the summits, in specific activities to combat military threats, terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking. This was especially evident in the conduct of joint military exercises and the activities of the Rapid Reaction Forces. The approaches to the Organization of Russia and the Central Asian countries belonging to the CSTO differ, judging by their conceptual documents.

Russia has made every effort to institutionalize the CSTO, adopt fundamental documents and create an internal structure. Subsequently, Russia's activity was aimed at ensuring the work of these structures and at developing regional security activities.

The countries of Central Asia do not always consider the CSTO the main instrument for ensuring regional security, which is reflected in their current Foreign Policy Concepts. The organization suffered severe image losses in 2010, after refusing to help Kyrgyzstan in the context of the interethnic Kyrgyz-Uzbek conflict in the south of the country.

Nevertheless, peacekeeping was an important area of the Organization's activities. Having practiced conducting peacekeeping operations in numerous exercises, in 2022 in Kazakhstan the CSTO was able to demonstrate its efficiency and effectiveness for the first time in 20 years of existence.

* The organization was declared a terrorist organization by the Supreme Court of Russia. The unified federal list of organizations, including foreign and international ones, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation (as of April 25, 2023). URL: <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/npd/terror.htm>, 18+

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Contribution of the author

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