

Analyst Navruz Karimov in an article for CABAR.asia examines the effectiveness of the CSTO, analyzes the organization's charter and budget, writes about the advantages and disadvantages of participating in this organization.

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Both NATO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) operate according to the principles of the UN Charter, have military bases of allies on their territory, fight against terrorism, and consider an armed attack on one member of the military-political block to be aggression towards all member states. Such similarities give reason to consider the CSTO as an organization formed in opposition to NATO,^[1] despite the fact that back in February 2009, CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha denied this.^[2]

The CSTO fragmentarily covers only part of Central Asia, part of the South Caucasus and Belarus, and the main player that interacts with these zones is Russia. Unlike the North Atlantic Treaty throughout its existence, the CSTO has never used its peacekeeping forces in any conflicts.

The article will consider questions about the effectiveness of the CSTO: can the CSTO solve the tasks that are defined in the charter? Why has it never intervened in any armed conflict, including the war for Nagorno-Karabakh, in which Armenia, a member of the CSTO, participated? To answer these questions, we will analyze the organization's charter and budget, the military power of the country's participants and their role in the CSTO, the advantages and disadvantages of being a part of this organization. A comparison between functions and capabilities of the CSTO and NATO will be conducted.

The principle of non-interference

In 2010, during violent inter-ethnic clashes in the south of Kyrgyzstan, the CSTO chose a strategy of "inaction." For the first time, Bishkek asked for help but no action followed. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev explained^[3] that CSTO peacekeeping forces only involve in the case of foreign intervention, and blamed the situation in Kyrgyzstan on the weakness and unwillingness of the previous government to "address the needs of the people". During the events in Kyrgyzstan in October 2020, the CSTO also did not intervene in the crisis situation, considering the ongoing events to be the matter of internal affairs.

During the escalation of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, the CSTO and the Russian Foreign Ministry told the Armenian government that the organization's defensive potential could not be used to protect an ally, because the war did not cross international borders. This decision derives from the Article 5 of the CSTO Charter,^[4] which states that the organization adheres to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of its members and is obliged to protect allies only from the threats from third countries or actors. Neither the 2010 crisis in Kyrgyzstan nor the war for Nagorno-Karabakh fell under this category.

Armenia in the CSTO is linked more via bilateral relations with Russia than with the rest of the organization. The point is that the representatives of the Central Asian countries and Belarus do not perceive the events taking place in the South Caucasus as a threat to their own security. And for Russia, staying in Armenia is important for maintaining its influence in the Caucasus. Therefore, to resolve the conflict, Russia sent its own peacekeeping forces to Nagorno-Karabakh, which were able to establish a temporary ceasefire and organize the exchange of prisoners of war.

The Russia-Armenia relations within the CSTO are now in a difficult situation. The assistance from Russia comes only in the form of mediation and consultations in attempts at diplomatic negotiations between Yerevan and Baku. Perhaps, Russia's lack of desire to fight for Armenia is also explained by the distrust of the Russian government towards politicians who came to power through the "revolution". Moreover, Armenia's prime minister Nikol Pashinyan actively cooperated with NATO,^[5] at the same time considering Russian military presence in Armenia as a guarantee of the country's security. Pashinian's attempt "play on both sides", of course, cannot please Moscow.

Russia as the core of the CSTO

According to the military potential and expenses of the CSTO member states, Russia is the main locomotive of the organization.^[6] Its contribution to the CSTO in 2015 accounted for 50% of the overall budget. Other 5 countries paid only 10%.^[7] The distribution of budget paying within NATO is more diversified, the US's share is only 16% and Germany pays the same amount.^[8] But out of 30 country members, more than 50% of NATO's budget is covered only by 4 countries: the USA, UK, France and Germany. Nonetheless, the financial commitments in NATO are distributed more evenly as compared to the CSTO.

The official data of the Ministry of Finance of Belarus for 2020 shows that the CSTO Collective Security Council approved a budget of 419.8 million Russian rubles (\$5.7 million), and the share of Belarus remained unchanged - 10% of the total pool.^[9] There is no similar data on the website of the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Tajikistan. However, it can be assumed that the mandate of the Republic of Tajikistan (and other participating states) in 2020 also amounted to 10% of the approved budget, that is about 570 thousand dollars.

In fact, the 50% share allows Moscow to maintain its military and political influence in the Post-Soviet space. Thanks to Article 7 of the CSTO Charter, the participating countries are prohibited from hosting foreign military bases on their territories without the consent of other members of the organization. Since Russia is the financial and military core of the organization, and decisions in the CSTO are made by consensus, the Russian Federation can veto such decisions.

It is more convenient for Russia to keep stability in the region by locating its military bases in countries bordering with nuclear powers. Armenia has a border with Iran, while Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are in close proximity with China. Tajikistan is not that far from the Indian border and serves as a buffer zone to contain terrorists who migrate across the Afghan border. The territorial location of Belarus has unique value for Russia, because Belarus has borders with the countries of the North Atlantic Treaty - Lithuania and

Poland.

Military power of the CSTO countries is not comparable to the forces of the North Atlantic Treaty. CSTO military power depends only on the capabilities of the Russian Federation, which is its only member with foreign military facilities, namely in Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In 2020 «Global Firepower» annual review ranked Russia as the second biggest military power among 138 countries.^[10] It means that in case of the armed conflict, Russia will have to rely only on its own forces.

This is also evident by the share of Russian soldiers on the territory of the CSTO. The size of the army of the CSTO member states is 1 million and 256 thousand soldiers, 80% of which are composed of Russian servicemen.^[11] NATO has 3 million and 462 thousand soldiers at its disposal, of which only 40% are coming from the US.^[12] Here you can see the dependence of organizations on major players; in NATO, the member states depend on the United States half as much as the CSTO member states on Russia, which makes collective and organizational capabilities of the CSTO weaker than NATO. One of the reasons may be that NATO is constantly filling the positions with new members, and the CSTO structure has remained unchanged since the adoption of the charter, apart from the case with Uzbekistan, which entered the organization in 2006, but decided to leave it in 2012.^[13]

What does the CSTO give to the participating countries?

The CSTO is actively used not as a military-political bloc, but as an infrastructure for trade and preferential transfer of military equipment and training the former Soviet republics soldiers. It's fair to consider the CSTO as a "transfer organization" for the transition of the CIS countries from Soviet military standards to modern ones.

For example, Tajikistan's share contribution to the CSTO in 2020 was about half a million dollars, but in 2019 alone, the country received weapons in an amount ten times higher than its mandate. In February 2019, Tajikistan received weapons and military equipment worth 9 million dollars,^[14] and at the end of October, Russia transferred military aid to Tajikistan for another \$5 million.^[15] By 2025, Russia has pledged to invest \$ 200 million in the Tajik army.^[16] Investments usually consist of decommissioned or obsolete weapons, which are readily accepted by Tajikistan. The participating states are able to purchase new Russian weapons at preferential domestic prices. Mainly Belarus and Kazakhstan are resorting to this option.

The participating countries cooperate^[17] to counter the threats of terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking that also emerge on the border with Afghanistan. From 2003 to 2019, 385

tons of drugs, 14 thousand firearms and 392 ammunition were seized within the framework of the CSTO regional operation «Channel». The CSTO is trying to fight illegal migration as well. From 2008 to 2019, on the basis of the operation « the Illegal», the organization was able to identify 1.5 million violations of migration legislation, detain 4 thousand illegal migrants, impose fines worth \$ 90 million and initiate more than 13 thousand criminal cases.



In 2020, 2 military exercises of the Collective Forces of the CSTO “Echelon - 2020” and “Indestructible Brotherhood - 2020” were held. Military exercises, along with the exchange of information and consultations, are one of the central mechanisms of CSTO used for deterring and preventing security threats. In 2009 the organization launched the operation

«PROXY» aimed at securitizing cyberspace. By the end of 2019, CSTO blocked 32 thousand websites with signs of criminal activity, and on the same basis, initiated 15 thousand criminal cases.

Despite the fact that regional operations are carried out on a regular basis («Channel», «Illegal» and «PROXY»), the presence of the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces, the mechanisms of conflict prevention are ineffective in the CSTO. In particular, the CSTO was unable to prevent the conflict in Osh in 2010 and predict the war for Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020. Over the past 18 years, the organization has maintained neutrality and has not supported either of sides.

In the end, Russia's participation in the CSTO formally confirms its right to dominate in the region, and the Central Asian member states of the CSTO thus receive political and military-technical support.

What is the CSTO criticized for?

Some of the regulations adopted by the CSTO do not have necessary implementation mechanisms. For example, the CSTO has a regulatory framework for cooperation with international organizations, but the mechanisms for its implementation are not spelled out. Because of it, cooperation with international organizations today is limited.

There is no unified strategy for the response of the CSTO states to internal and international conflicts. As a result, internal political stability in the Eurasian region has suffered. This fact was also recognized at the meeting of the CSTO Collective Security Council on December 2, 2020.^[18]

Most of the armed conflicts that have occurred globally since 1946 were indigenous.^[19] The CSTO's principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of its members leaves the huge potential of the organization unrealized. At the same time, countries themselves are often unable to resolve intrastate conflicts without intermediaries, but they do not want the CSTO and Russia to intervene.

A good example is the conflict on the Tajik-Kyrgyz border, where clashes with border guards and border communities regularly break out. The Tajik Foreign Ministry refused the intervention by third parties in the situation, calling "activities in the field of delimitation and demarcation of state borders an internal affair of the CSTO member states".^[20] But for several years now this conflict has not been settled within the framework of bilateral negotiations.

To this day, the CSTO peacekeeping forces have never been involved in armed conflicts, so it is impossible to assess their actual value. At the same time, the number of troops in the CSTO collective security system^[21] by 2020 is about 26,600 people, which characterizes a slight increase in the military power of the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces since the beginning of their creation in 2009 - then the CRRF had about 20 thousand people.^[22]



In the CSTO, cooperation in the humanitarian sphere is poor, especially in terms of cultural activities, education and projects on the promotion of democratic values. This is one of the main reasons for the lack of a positive peacekeeping image for the CSTO.

The lack of research programs negatively affects not only the CSTO brand, but also its productivity: the presence of analytical entities within CSTO's structure could prevent the escalation of conflicts in the Eurasian region and provide the public with a full report. With that new potential participants would probably see an important and effective regional structure in the CSTO.

The contribution of other member countries to the CSTO, unlike Russia, is insignificant. Therefore, the CSTO is viewed as a Russia-led exclusive club for the countries of Central Asia, Belarus and Armenia, who consent to host Russian military infrastructure.

Will there be changes in 2021?

On December 2, at an online meeting of the CSTO Collective Security Council released a statement on the formation of a just and sustainable world order that changes the trajectory of the organization's work.^[23] The statement softly criticizes the isolated confrontational work of international organizations and big powers, which leads to conflicts.

The members of the Collective Security Council believe that tangible results in ensuring global stability can be compensated by combining the work of the CSTO, CIS, SCO, OSCE, NATO and the EU. Thus, the organization shifts the focus from protecting only its own interests to creating a common security space, with honest and transparent exchange of information between the parties. On this background, Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko proposed to give an opportunity to countries wishing to maintain regular relations with the CSTO to obtain observer and partner statuses.

The idea of a new international order is based on a principle similar to the values of the UN's - "the security of everyone is the security of all." Although the CSTO admits that the process of integration into a "single world entity" will be long and difficult. So far, such declarative ideas look utopian.

It is noteworthy that Pashinyan gave credit not to the organization, but specifically to Vladimir Putin for his help in resolving the Karabakh conflict, as a ceasefire was reached by the peacekeeping forces of Russia, not the CSTO.

Tajikistan accepted the post of CSTO chairman in 2021 and from this year has the right to

promote Tajikistan's security agenda among which Emomali Rahmon highlighted:^[24]

- Strengthening cooperation in the military and military-technical sphere.
- Enhanced interaction of the CSTO with international and regional organizations.
- Creation of a mechanism to ensure the medical and biological security of the participating countries.

Conclusion and recommendations

The CSTO was originally created to combat new types of threats – terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, illegal migration and human trafficking. But the organization still does not have effective operating mechanisms for the settlement of modern conflicts, both international and domestic. The creation of mechanisms would strengthen the organization's potential in ensuring regional security. Today, the effectiveness of the CSTO and cooperation with Russia in military terms is insufficient.

The protection against hybrid threats needs to be put in foreground and the organization's budget reallocated in its favor. Cyberspace must constantly be monitored and protected, not solely as a part of particular operations. Similar to military units, cyberspace defense specialists, need to conduct the same exercises to find, neutralize threats and improve infrastructure.

Security prognosis instruments are not developed in the CSTO. Such mechanisms should be included in the charter, so that the organization is not only ready to respond to crisis situations, but act preemptively. Preventive and advisory mechanisms can prevent the escalation of conflicts. To solve this problem, we recommend the CSTO to strengthen cooperation in the scientific field and employ the practice of annual regional analysis, drawing up methods and recommendations to prevent new threats in Central Asia, Belarus and Armenia. This can be done by the already approved Scientific and Expert Council, the CSTO Analytical Association and independent experts.

Security and stability in the region are associated, among other things, with a healthy socio-economic climate. The pandemic, which has hit the global economy and households hard, could set the stage for increased drug trafficking and illegal migration. Of course, social issues are not included in the CSTO agenda, but they indirectly relate to its main agenda. To maintain economies and return the pace of development to pre-crisis levels, the CSTO can strengthen cooperation with other regional organizations, such as the EAEU, SCO, and the European Union.

The CSTO activities are not transparent and raises questions in expert communities. Creating an image of an effective and useful organization will require the CSTO not only to conduct PR campaigns, but also to allocate funds for humanitarian programs. Also, some of the documents that are adopted at the meetings, including the approval of the budget and planned costs should be openly published on the official platforms of the organization.

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