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With Ukraine Revitalizing NATO, Russia Dusts Off its Own Security Alliance

By Matthew Bodner

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The leaders of the CSTO nations standing for photos at an informal September alliance meeting held in Moscow.

While top Russian officials and pro-Kremlin politicians continue to paint NATO as an existential threat to Russia and even an instigator of the Ukraine crisis, Moscow has been working to strengthen the legitimacy of its own security organization: the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

But while this bundling of six former Soviet republics mimics aspects of the Western military alliance, Russia's ambition to create an analogue to NATO has struggled, stricken by low funding and contrasting visions of the group's goal. While the Kremlin tilts at global power politics with the CSTO, most of its underdeveloped allies would rather use the alliance to bolster their own undemocratic regimes rather than duel with the West.

"Honestly, the CSTO is something of a mess," Mark Galeotti, an expert in Russian security

affairs at New York University, told The Moscow Times.

Shaky Foundations

It goes without saying that the 28-member, 65-year-old North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is a stronger and more coherent alliance than the 22-year-old CSTO.

Indeed, Russia's skill at alienating its neighbors — now on display in Ukraine — has seen the number of CSTO states fall by a third since its inception. Founded in 1992, shortly after the end of the Soviet Union, the organization originally included nine states: Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Georgia.

Troop Strength of Russia's CSTO Security Alliance

While none of the Collective Security Treaty Organization's forces are permanently deployed, each member nation has designated specific units within their militaries to stand on call for deployments. CSTO forces are largely stationed in Central Asian bases but answer to a Moscow-based command structure.

The members — Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan — do not contribute equal numbers of troops.

While the alliance has never deployed units, under Article 4 of the CSTO charter they would conceivably see action if one of the group's members was attacked by a foreign military — much like NATO's famous Article 5.

There are two key combat forces organized by the CSTO: the Central Asian Regional Collective Rapid Deployment Force (KSBR TsAR) and the Collective Fast Deployment Force (KSOR).

Central Asia Regional Collective Rapid Deployment Force

The KSBR TsAR force was established in 2001 by agreement of the presidents

of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The force has about 5,000 troops on permanent combat readiness, supported by 300 tanks and armored vehicles, with close air support provided by 10 Su-25 fighter jets and 13 Mi-8MTV-1 helicopters. According to Moscow Defense Brief, a magazine published by the Center for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, a private Moscow-based think tank, the Central Asia force is an equivalent of NATO's Response Force and can be deployed in under five days.

The KSBR TsAR holds a comprehensive joint-exercise annually and is comprised of:

• Russia: Three motor rifle battalions based at the 201st Military Base in Tajikistan, Russia's biggest foreign military deployment; and an air group based at the 999th Air Base in Kant, Kyrgyzstan.

• Kazakhstan: Two airborne assault battalions.

• Kyrgyzstan: Two alpine rifle battalions.

• Tajikistan: One motorized rifle battalion and two airborne assault battalions.

The NATO Response Force (NRF), in comparison, has 25,000 troops on six-month dedicated NATO deployments. CSTO forces, meanwhile, maintain a constant state of battle-readiness within their national militaries so that they can be tapped for CSTO action at any time. But they are not permanently stationed under CSTO duty.

Collective Fast Deployment Force

CSTO's more powerful force is the newer interregional Collective Fast Deployment

Force (KSOR), created in 2009.

The KSOR's strength is about 20,000 troops. Of these, 17,000 are permanently stationed combat-ready troops, and 3,000 are special operations troops supplied by the security services of CSTO member states, according to Moscow Defense Brief.

The KSOR goes on exercises at least once a year, and holds two special exercises every two or three years, focusing on special forces and counter-narcotics operations.

According to information compiled by Moscow Defense Brief, the force is comprised of units from:

• Russia: 98th Guard Airborne Assault Division and the 31st Guard Airborne Assault Brigade

• Armenia: A battalion from the 23rd Independent Special Operations Brigade

• Belarus: The 103rd Independent Brigade

• Kazakhstan: 37th Independent Airborne Assault Brigade and a battalion from the First Independent Marines Brigade.

• Kyrgyzstan: A battalion from the Second Guard Independent Motorized Rifle Brigade.

• Tajikistan: A battalion from the Seventh Independent Airborne Assault Brigade.

Other Forces

There are three smaller forces operating under the CSTO as well. Two of them are essentially bilateral defense arrangements of Russia-Belarus and Russia-Armenia, rather than forces united under a central command, and the third is a peacekeeping force of a few thousand drawn from national security

services — police forces, rather than professional soldiers.

Since then, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Georgia have left the alliance, after refusing to sign an extension to the treaty in 1999. Uzbekistan rejoined in 2006, but left in 2012 when Russia got the right to unilaterally veto the placement of foreign military bases on the territory of a CSTO member.

The resulting alliance is dominated by Russia, by far the strongest member. Of the combined $2.4 trillion combined value of the CSTO economies, Russia accounts for $2.1 trillion.

The alliance's funding is annually hashed out by its member states, which must contribute to the alliance. Most recently, the CSTO council agreed in December 2013 to allocate 33 billion rubles ($1 billion) to outfit its rapid response forces. Although it is not clear how much of this is being contributed by each member, it is likely that Moscow contributes substantially more based on the disproportionate numbers of Russian troops tapped for CSTO duty than soldiers from its other five members.

In this way, the organization is structured similarly to NATO. All of NATO's 28 members are responsible for maintaining their own militaries, ensuring simply that the forces they choose to contribute to the alliance are able to jump into NATO duty if necessary.

This puts Russia in a situation analogous to the U.S. in NATO. Washington has for many years been forced to shoulder a disproportionate share of NATO burdens in order to maintain the alliance — and therefore its influence over the trans-Atlantic alliance.

Like NATO, the spearhead of CSTO's capacity is focused in two battle groups of 5,000 and 20,000 troops. These forces consist mainly of Russian, often elite troops, Dmitry Gorenburg, a Russian military expert at Harvard University and the military think tank CNA, told The Moscow Times.

Modeled on NATO's 25,000-strong highly mobile rapid response force, the CSTO contingents are mandated to provide collective defense against an outside aggressor force — the equivalent of NATO's famous Article 5 provisions — and deploy peacekeeping forces beyond its borders under United Nations mandate. Under the CSTO charter, peacekeepers and response forces can also be sent anywhere within the CSTO to protect its members.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, in particular, leech off the alliance's military strength, according to Ruslan Pukhov, director of Russian defense research institute CAST. The same can perhaps be said of Armenia. All three countries contribute only battalions of a few hundred soldiers, while other members put up full brigades consisting of several battalions and supporting vehicles.

CSTO Ramps Up

In recent years, however, Russia's military has moved to make the CSTO a more coherent organization, beefing up its commitment at the same time as Moscow seeks to expand its economic influence among its post-Soviet neighbors.

The conflict in Ukraine, where NATO has accused Russia of covert military incursions to aid pro-Russian separatists, has turbo-charged the process.

Last month, Russian President Vladimir Putin asked Russian lawmakers to ratify an agreement to strengthen the CSTO's unified command structure, augmenting it with new administrative and information protection agencies. No announcement of its ratification has yet been made, and the practical details remain unclear.

The CSTO is also establishing a cyber-warfare command — tasked with protecting the alliance from cyber-attacks and perhaps even going on the cyber-offensive — similar to those operated by NATO and China, under the aegis of the CSTO special forces command, Interfax reported last month.

Russia is meanwhile strengthening its military infrastructure in CSTO member states under the guise of protecting them from a potential threat from NATO. Russian Air Force chief Colonel General Viktor Bondarev told news agency TASS this month that Moscow planned to expand its airbases in Armenia and Kyrgyzstan and establish an airbase for fighter jets in eastern Belarus in 2016.

Justifying the expansion plans, CSTO Secretary-General Nikolai Bordyuzha said it was a "response to actions taken by the U.S. in deploying air assets to the Baltics."

Protecting Authoritarianism

But for all the new construction and attention on the CSTO, Moscow has yet to address the organization's core problem: a lack of unified purpose.

Just as the U.S. created NATO to expand its global influence, Russia sees the CSTO as a means of cementing its regional hegemony, Pukhov said. But the alliance's other members have a different aim in mind, seeing it as insurance against popular discontent and a means of ensuring the survival of their of authoritarian regimes, analysts say. The result is that neither side is satisfying the other.

In 2010, the CSTO failed to intervene when popular protests in Kyrgyzstan threatened to unseat President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and his government. Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko — whose 20-year reign has seen him referred to as "Europe's last dictator" — slammed the organization for failing to support Bakiyev. Although the CSTO's mandate does not oblige it to protect its members' political leaders, these leaders were unimpressed by Moscow's reluctance to help one of their own.

Later in 2010, the CSTO was hit by another challenge that appeared to many to fall under its mandate. Following Bakiyev's ouster, the interim Kyrgyz government requested that CSTO peacekeepers be deployed to quell ethnic violence between Uzbek and Kyrgyz groups in the country's south. Russia's then-President Dmitry Medvedev wavered, and after consultation between CSTO members, Secretary-General Bordyuzha refused, claiming that the peacekeeping responsibilities of the organization did not apply to breaking up a conflict.

Indeed, even United Nations peacekeepers will only deploy to a region to enforce peace after the parties have agreed to it, not end a conflict.

Most likely, Moscow simply did not want to get dragged into a prolonged local conflict, said Alexander Cooley, an expert in Central Asian affairs at Columbia University. "Presumably CSTO peacekeepers or an intervention mandate could have played a prominent role, but this was a case where [to do so] didn't serve Moscow's interests," he said.



CSTO

Soldiers from a CSTO group celebrating the completion of joint exercises.

Dysfunctional Mess

Another key unresolved issue undermining the alliance is its stance on the frozen conflicts that dot the post-Soviet landmass.

The abrupt collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 prompted a rash of wars among newly independent Soviet republics eager to change their territorial boundaries. With those republics unable to defeat one another outright, many such conflicts have festered and still poison regional stability.

To the growing frustration of members such as Armenia — which is in an occasionally bloody 20-year dispute with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region — Russia is unwilling to promote the interests of its CSTO allies in their border conflicts.

Armenia views the CSTO as its primary guarantee against Azeri aggression, and has been become increasingly vocal about the CSTO not taking a stronger line on Armenia's behalf.

When the latest violence flared up in August, Russia again twiddled its thumbs, leading Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan to rebuke the CSTO for not taking a firmer line when Bordyuzha made his first-ever visit to the Armenia-Azerbaijan border earlier this month.

Future of the CSTO

According to Cooley, the Central Asia expert at Columbia University, Russia's role as the regional security leader in the region will be bolstered by NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan, as it will further legitimize its military presence in the region as it acts to prevent spillover from Afghanistan's ongoing conflict.

But in order to strengthen its legitimacy in the region even further and secure the loyalty of partners such as Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, Russia will have to stand up for them against Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan.

"You get exclusive loyalty of the client state to your security agenda and, in return, back them in local conflicts — that's the nature of the bargain," Cooley said.

Russian security expert Galeotti echoed the point: "If Moscow pushes alliances that are vessels for its own desire to be the Eurasian hegemon, then it will face foot-dragging at best, and outright hostility at worst, when its interests too clearly diverge from its partners."

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