A Fading Alliance?

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The origins of the CSTO

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is an intergovernmental military alliance established in 2002 between several Eurasian countries. It aims to ensure regional peace and stability through military cooperation and mutual defense. Modeled after NATO's Article Five, its Article Seven mandates collective security, while Article Eight emphasizes combating transnational threats through joint efforts in border protection, information security, and civilian defense.

Despite these goals, the CSTO has struggled with internal fractures —Uzbekistan left in 2012, Armenia has frozen its participation, and Kyr-

gyzstan questions its membership. Russia's dominance has shaped the organization, and Russia's aggression in Ukraine along with ongoing border conflicts have cast doubt on the CSTO's effectiveness and future viability. This article examines its role in regional security and prospects for continued cooperation.

A legacy of inaction

The CSTO has had a few affirming moments since its creation. In 2004, it received observer status in the United Nations General Assembly, and it has also collaborated with the OSCE. In addition, member countries have worked together to conduct joint combined-corps military exercises, which have been taking place since 2004. Another notable moment for the organization came with the brief deployment of peacekeepers to Kazakhstan in January 2022. However, the organization's shortcomings are much more numerous.

The first signs of a divide within the organization came in 2008, when members declined Russia's call for the establishment of a new "European security architecture". Another shortcoming came in 2010, when the organization refused Kyrgyzstan's request to counter ethnic clashes in its southern region, claiming that it would not intervene in internal affairs. Further inaction followed in 2020, when the organization refused to intervene in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and again in 2021 during the Tajik-Kyrgyz border clashes.

Adding to this history of inaction, we can turn to the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, where most CSTO members have remained "neutral". Politically and militarily speaking, only Belarus has openly supported Russia since its invasion of Ukraine in 2022. No other CSTO members have recognized the independence of Luhansk and Donetsk or recognized Russia's annexation of four additional Ukrainian provinces. In fact, Russia's war in Ukraine has only highlighted the CSTOs internal divisions. Furthermore, a debilitated Russia – who contributes 50% of the organization's budget– has hindered the organization's potential to act.

From crisis to decline

Given the current context, the organization is virtually unable to act, as its operability is heavily reliant on Russia. In addition, the real challenges faced by its member states are those of border clashes, sabotage and cyber-attacks. Its charter, designed for full-scale military invasions, is ill equipped to provide effective solutions.

This has led to a changing context in which several CSTO members have begun to further pursue alliances with other nations. Armenia has effectively frozen its participation in the CSTO and has recently adopted a bill aimed at starting the process to join the EU. While Armenia looks to the west, other countries explore deepening relations with China and Turkey.

Notably Tajikistan, who is seeking heightened military support from China, likely as it tries to strengthen its border with Afghanistan.

The future of the CSTO is likely to depend on Russia's position after the end of the war in Ukraine, whether it emerges strengthened or weakened. However, current trends point towards fragmentation between member states. While Russia maintains strong ties with Belarus and Kazakhstan, other members are seeking bilateral cooperation with other actors, both within and beyond the region. As multilateral cooperation within the CSTO declines and internal divisions persist, efforts to address regional threats, particularly terrorism, are less likely to succeed.

Although the organization is unlikely to disappear, its fragmentation and decline creates room for greater instability and the emergence of security challenges.

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