



Russia and the CSTO in the Face of Destabilisation in the Neighbourhood

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The escalation of military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) and mass demonstrations in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan have forced Russia to react to instability in its neighbourhood. The Russian authorities prefer bilateral solutions, using the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) only in a limited way, mainly presenting it as a counterweight to NATO. The other CSTO members treat it as a forum for military cooperation, but due to its political weakness, they count primarily on security guarantees from Russia.

The political crisis that [has lasted in Belarus since August in which Alexander Lukashenka](#) fears losing power, prompted him to ask for support from Russia. In Kyrgyzstan in October, there was a palace coup, and Russian President Vladimir Putin suspended diplomatic contacts with the new authorities. Azerbaijan at nearly the same time initiated military action against Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, with Russia stepping in to mediate a ceasefire. The CSTO was not used in any of these cases, which casts doubt on its ability to stabilise the situation in its member states.

CSTO—Goals and Tasks. The CSTO was established in 2002 by the Tashkent Treaty (TT), signed a decade earlier. Currently, its members are Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. The declared purpose of the organisation is to ensure peace and security on its members' territory. The treaty states that its members will come to the aid of another in case of an armed attack or to prevent their destabilisation. The CSTO task catalogue includes the fight against terrorism and dealing with irregular migration, as well as cooperation in peacekeeping operations, both in the member states and around the world, at the request of the UN. For this purpose, regular exercises at various levels are held, including manoeuvres in September and October in Belarus, the *Indestructible Brotherhood-2020* command- and staff-training courses for CSTO peacekeeping forces, and in 2018 in Kazakhstan to destroy simulated "illegal armed groups". Joint military exercises and training of the armed forces as well as the possibility of obtaining cheaper Russian military equipment

are the most important functions of the CSTO from the point of view of Russia's allies. In turn, Russia perceives the CSTO as an instrument of defence integration in the post-Soviet region. This enables control of the security policy of the member states—one of the treaty's key provisions is a ban on joining other military alliances. Therefore, for reasons of prestige, Russia presents the CSTO as a counterweight to NATO.

CSTO Anti-Crisis Competences. In the event of a threat to the stability, territorial integrity, and sovereignty of one or more member states, the CSTO should immediately launch a joint consultation mechanism in order to coordinate positions and develop and undertake actions to assist these states in eliminating the resulting threat (Art. 2 TT). Meanwhile, in the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and the possible threat to Armenia's integrity, the CSTO General Secretary did not convene an extraordinary meeting of the Collective Security Council. The issue of Armenia's security was not even included on the agenda of the regular Council meeting scheduled for 2 December. Although the Armenian authorities themselves could have asked the CSTO for consultations, they did not do so because the organization did not respond to the earlier escalation of military operations in the NK in 2016, and because of differences and disputes within the alliance. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan—as Turkic states—side with Azerbaijan, and Russia and Belarus provide the latter with weapons (64% of its armaments purchases in 2007–2019).

The CSTO had previously refused to engage in the stabilisation of member states. In April 2010, it did not send a peacekeeping operation to Kyrgyzstan during the revolution there, when violent riots broke out, although the president at the time, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, asked the organisation to do so. This demonstrated that the CSTO does not consider the internal situation of its member states within its focus, which is mainly on external threats.

Russia in the Face of Crises. Contrary to the CSTO, Russia is interested in the direction of internal changes in the countries of the organisation. For this reason, Russia supported Lukashenka in Belarus, postponing the prospect of a “colour revolution” in that country and forcing a weakened politician to deepen integration within the Union State of Belarus and Russia. However, Russia’s ability to influence the political changes in its neighbourhood is weakening. In Kyrgyzstan, in the face of social protests and the removal of President Sooronbay Jeenbekov, Russia acted with restraint and decided to wait for the final political settlement. A similar strategy was applied to the revolution in Armenia in 2018, when Nikol Pashinyan came to power as a result of mass demonstrations. Although Russia then agreed with him on Armenian-Russian cooperation, it did not support him during the current conflict in NK. This is because it assumes that Pashinyan, weakened as a result of Armenia’s defeat, will agree to Russian conditions regarding enhanced military presence in that country.

In the South Caucasus, Russia prefers playing up regional tensions between the states. Due to the fact that the conflict in NK is taking place *de iure* on Azerbaijani territory, it has made it easier for Russia not to support Armenia. Russia, unwilling to get involved in another war, emphasises that it has good relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan and that the NK is outside the CSTO obligations and Russia’s bilateral agreements with Armenia, under which Russian soldiers and [others are stationed at the 102nd military base in that country](#). In return, President Putin engaged in mediation and, through a separate tripartite agreement, sent Russian peacekeepers to the NK, outside CSTO mechanisms.

Conclusions. The Russian authorities treat stabilising their neighbourhood as counteracting “colour revolutions” and limiting the influence of external actors in the post-Soviet region (such as the EU in Belarus, Turkey in the South

Caucasus, and China in Kyrgyzstan). Although Russia is less and less able to control all political changes in neighbouring countries, it is trying to maintain its dominant position in the region. Despite allied commitments to Armenia, more important for Russia was to play the conflict over NK between the opposing parties. The success of the Russian authorities was to bring armistice between Armenia and Azerbaijan and to send a peacekeeping operation to NK. In this way, Russia strengthened its military presence in the South Caucasus. The failure of Russia, however, is the growing importance of Turkey in the region and the awakened ambitions of Azerbaijan, which has managed to take control of large areas previously controlled by the Armenians. The unresolved actual status of NK, which would determine the territory’s ownership, increases the likelihood of another military escalation, which may involve the Russian soldiers stationed there.

In general, CSTO member states make limited use of the alliance to respond to crises. Although the CSTO guarantees did not apply to NK, the lack of a political response or the initiation of consultation procedures within the CSTO proves that the alliance is of little use to states whose security is seriously threatened. Due to internal disputes and the passivity of the CSTO in the face of previous crises, its members do not coordinate their positions and activities within this organisation. For this reason, in the short term, the CSTO will not be able to use its potential to conduct peacekeeping operations (e.g. in NK) on its territory, although it will report readiness to be involved in other regions of the world, including as needed by the United Nations.

The CSTO will not be used to suppress the demonstrations in Belarus or Kyrgyzstan. Although Lukashenka—seeking support from the CSTO—has accused Poland and Lithuania of interfering in Belarus’s internal affairs, his statements are part of a campaign of information [warfare waged by Russia with Western countries](#). Despite the political and military weakness of the CSTO, Russia will continue to use the organisation to compete with NATO in the future. In this situation, NATO may consider including CSTO countries other than Russia in its strategic communication in order to reach them, for example, with a message about NATO activity on its Eastern Flank.