

5 Conclusions – “No one but us!”

“*Nikto krome nas!*” (“No one but us!”), the proud slogan of Russia’s Airborne Forces (VDV), is true in many ways when one considers how the CSTO is building its capacity for collective military intervention in quickly emerging local conflicts, primarily in Central Asia. After more than a decade in Afghanistan, few countries outside the CSTO are contemplating any type of military operation in the wider Central Asia region. Russia is the main contributor to all of the CSTO’s forces. The VDV are often described as the best-functioning and most combat-ready part of Russia’s Armed Forces. The VDV command structure is used by the CORF and the VDV make up the lion’s share of the CORF, the CSTO’s main instrument for addressing quickly emerging local conflicts. To talk about the CSTO’s collective capability for military intervention in conflicts in the former Soviet Union is essentially to talk about Russia’s ability. Without Russia, other CSTO member states are likely to lack both the ability and the will to intervene. Russia’s ability is in turn dependent on the readiness of its Armed Forces to intervene, which must be seen against the backdrop of the military reform that started in 2009. The question is whether Russia or the rest of the world wants it to be no one but the VDV.

All in all, the CSTO’s military capacity is essentially the same thing as Russia’s capacity, both for collective defence and for crisis intervention. In practice this includes the Russian forces assigned to the CSTO, that is the regional forces and primarily the VDV units assigned to the CORF. Apart from that Russia is likely to be able to deploy and sustain not more than a motor rifle brigade, with air support, logistics and so on, for up to six months without significant re-prioritization between its military districts. The collective defence obligations in the three disjointed CSTO sub-regions are entirely dependent on Russia’s ability to uphold these commitments. No other member state can. Whilst all CSTO members have assigned forces to the CORF and PKF for crisis intervention, it is currently hard to see any of them deploying significant forces for any length of time outside their respective sub-regions. CSTO command and control appears almost entirely built on Russian systems.

Russia clearly dominates the CSTO; the organization is a part of President Putin’s Eurasian integration efforts and Russia pays for it. The main resource flows are from Russia to the other member states; very little goes the other way. At the same time Moscow seems to be keen to strike defence-related deals with CSTO countries on a bilateral basis, indicating that many issues for some reason cannot be dealt with within the CSTO. Although this is practical, a predominance of bilateral relations between Russia and CSTO members may contribute to undermining the role of the CSTO. In short, for interventions, Russia provides the resources, the others provide the legitimacy. A possible consequence of Russia’s dominance in providing the resources for collective military

intervention is that the other countries may reduce their efforts in the same field, perhaps feeling that Russia does it for them. That would certainly further increase these regimes' dependence on Russia.

The CSTO is an ambitious project in the making. Much of what is written about it is either normative, saying how things *should* be, or announcements about plans, about needs for this or that, about new projects launched and so on – essentially things that have not yet materialized. Respectfully, one can conclude that international security organizations take time to develop, even when they are bound together by joint values. So far, the CSTO's political ambition appears likely to be greater than its as yet untested military capability, although the latter is evolving based on available resources, mainly through an ambitious exercise scheme. Given the conceptual, political and military structural challenges, it is clear that the ambitions are high, but the reality is much harsher, and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. This leaves Central Asia very vulnerable if conflicts should emerge.

Until now, the CSTO has not intervened in internal conflicts of its member states or in conflicts between member states. The organization's statutes and repeated statements of its Secretary-General indicate that this will continue. The risk of getting drawn into long-lasting conflicts probably also makes those concerned think twice. But two factors point in another direction. First, with the new decision-making rules about launching CSTO military interventions, whereby a majority vote has replaced the previous requirement for unanimity (which was effectively a veto for each member state), it is easier to launch operations. An authoritarian ruler facing an armed opposition would probably not hesitate to provide the necessary invitation as the legal basis for intervention. Second, the light and mobile nature of the CORF intervention force makes it well suited for quick intervention to address ethnic or political tension, and not only for collective defence tasks. Whether the CORF will be sufficient will be dependent on the nature of the conflict, for example how long it goes on.

The failure to intervene with the CORF or other CSTO forces in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 undoubtedly illustrated the CSTO's shortcomings as an instrument to promote security. It remains to be seen if the changes that have been initiated since are adequate to create new resolve within the CSTO. Any real decisions will depend on political circumstances at the time. One important aspect for coalition operations is mutual trust. That is unlikely to improve significantly within the CSTO in the near future. The CSTO will also remain a Russian instrument to protect Russian interests in the former Soviet republics. In addition, given the nature of its guiding document and the authoritarian nature of many of the participating regimes, it is easy to dismiss the CSTO as a club run by dictators, for dictators.

Concerning security in Central Asia for the foreseeable future, however, such a dismissal misses an important point. No matter what the rest of the world thinks

about the Russian claims to privileged influence in Central Asia, the CSTO, essentially Russia, will be at the centre of handling security challenges in the region. If the rest of the world wants to contribute to solving them, there are few alternatives to interacting with the CSTO. After more than a decade of military intervention in Afghanistan, many countries understandably have limited appetite for similar interventions far from home. Interaction with the CSTO could also be a way to contribute to building security in Central Asia and help develop the organization. This could in the long run also be advantageous for the CSTO, bringing in, for example, recent hard-won experience from Afghanistan.

The potential security challenges combined (such as ethnic tensions in the Ferghana Valley, interstate conflict between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan, intra-state tensions in all five countries, or challenges from Afghanistan) are so great that it is hard to see Russia and the CSTO being able to handle them, especially long-drawn-out conflicts or if two or more conflicts erupt simultaneously. The CORF and CSTO are like a readily available fire extinguisher for putting out a spark. But if that fails and a bigger fire starts, where would the fire brigade come from? Despite the CSTO's efforts, international resources may be needed. The implications of a scenario with a CSTO operation in parallel to a UN mission, such as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) working in parallel in Afghanistan, could therefore be exploited. It is hence important to understand how the CSTO evolves. Obvious areas for interaction would be the seminars on peacekeeping, table-top exercises and in the long run exercises. Further study could possibly indicate other areas of interaction. The question is how much Russia is willing to allow outsiders to affect its coveted sphere of influence and how much the rest of the world actually cares to get involved. They might have to, since many factors may ignite conflict in Central Asia. 2014 is approaching much faster than the efforts of the CSTO countries will result in a robust joint capacity to handle jointly several or long-drawn-out conflicts.

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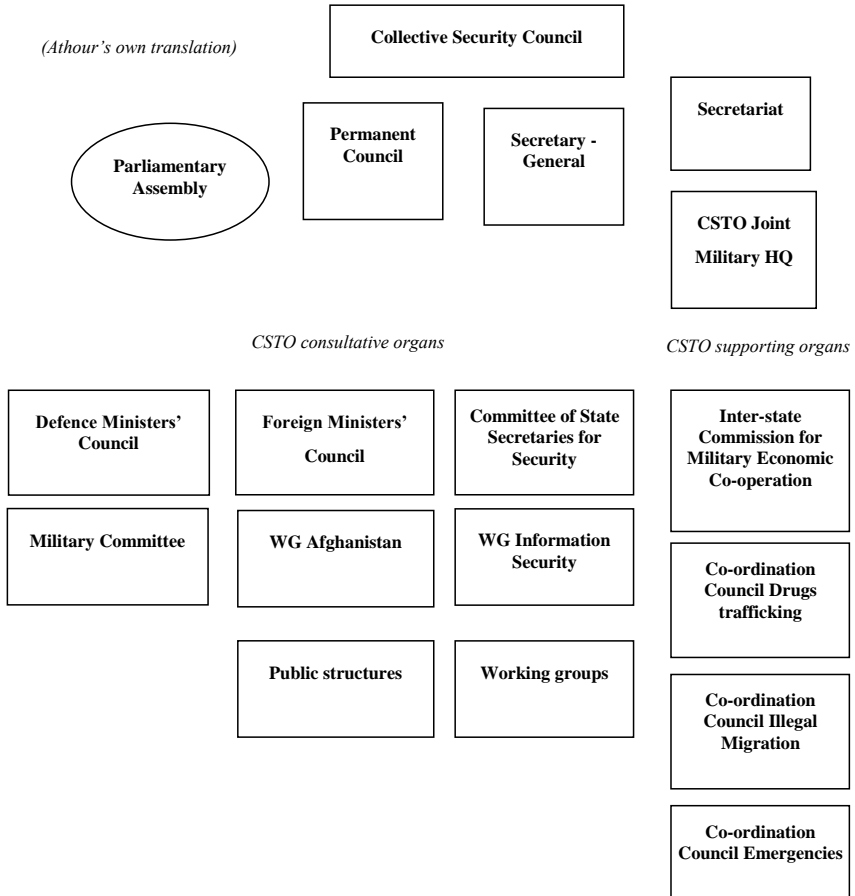
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APPENDIX 1

The organization of the political-military decision-making bodies of the CSTO in February 2013



(Source: <http://www.odkb-csto.org/structure/>)



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