

The Demise of CSTO: Why is Russia Left Without Allies?

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For the first time since World War II, a foreign army crossed onto Russian soil. On 6 August 2024, the Ukrainian army launched a full-scale military incursion into the Russian Kursk region and has since taken control of a part of the region. Russia has effectively lost its territorial integrity and sovereignty. However, there is still no serious support at both the multilateral and national levels—either from regional and international institutions of which Russia is a member, or from allied and partner states. Particularly striking is the silence and inaction of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Here I explore the reasons why the CSTO has not responded to the violation of Russia's territorial integrity.

Founded in 1992, the CSTO, a regional collective security and defense organization, brings together six post-Soviet countries: Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Armenia. Article 3 of its charter [states](#) that “the goals of the Organization shall be the strengthening of peace, international and regional security and stability, protection of independence on a collective basis, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Member States, in achievement of which the Member States prefer political means.” And article 7 stipulates that:

The Member States shall take joint measures to achieve the purposes of the Organization to form thereunder an efficient system of collective security providing collective protection in case of threats to safety, stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty and exercise of the right to collective defense, including creation of coalition (collective) forces of the Organization, regional (united) groups of armies

(forces), peacekeeping forces, united systems and the bodies governing them, military infrastructure.

After Ukraine's Kursk assault, not only did Russia not request the military bloc to defend its rights enshrined in the Charter, but the country did not even propose to this topic for discussion with a view to formulating a joint political position. Only the following official statement was issued by the CSTO press service: "The issue of providing military assistance could arise only in the case of an official request from a member state, and if necessary, the CSTO Secretariat will implement all the procedures envisaged in such a case within the established time limits." One can understand the reasons why Moscow has not asked the CSTO for military assistance: First of all, Russian leadership seeks to reduce the scale of the problem the country faces and downplay its significance, signaling that Russian manpower is sufficient to overcome it. More broadly, Moscow is trying to signal that there is no alarming situation that requires urgent and immediate intervention.

On the other hand, the key issue is whether there is a common political will and solidarity to support Russia through the CSTO. Russia can seek protection from the CSTO only when it has the certainty that leadership will get the desired political or military support. Putin does not believe he has that trust. With the exception of Belarus, which is part of the Union State with Russia and whose sovereignty is limited, other CSTO member States have so far maintained a neutral position in Russia's war against Ukraine. These nations continue to maintain bilateral economic relations with Russia, yet they are proceeding cautiously to not incur Western sanctions. As for the national reaction to Ukraine's incursion onto Russian soil, only two CSTO members have officially expressed their positions regarding the events: Belarus and Kazakhstan. Predictably, Belarus condemned Ukraine's Kursk operation, while an official representative from Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry evaded an unambiguous assessment, saying that

“today the whole world is watching the situation in certain areas of the Kursk region of the Russian Federation with great concern, and Kazakhstan has always emphasized the need for all countries to comply with the UN Charter, which clearly sets out the principle of territorial integrity of states.” As is well known, the principle of territorial integrity is the top priority for Ukraine, and Kyiv reiterates that the solution to the problem should be based precisely on the restoration of its territorial integrity, and furthermore references that that it does not intend to annex Russian territory. In this regard, Kazakhstan’s position is in Kyiv’s interests.

Looking back at the CSTO’s past, we see that it conducted a collective operation only once. Amid Kazakhstan’s spiraling mass unrest accompanied by armed clashes that broke out in early January 2022, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev [called for](#) CSTO help. The organization acceded to the request and sent its collective peacekeeping forces. However, their mission lasted only 5 days: The CSTO peacekeepers, deployed on 7 January, handed over the facilities they were involved in protecting to Kazakh security forces on 12 January, and began to withdraw from the country on 13 January. The government of Kazakhstan was actually not interested in any Russian military contingent’s presence in the country under the guise of CSTO peacekeeping troops.

The fact that the CSTO was able to react quickly to the events in Kazakhstan under the leadership of Russia does not at all indicate that it is an effective organization in which the spirit of union and solidarity prevails. On the contrary, we can talk about the process of disintegration within this alliance. The problems and mutual distrust that have arisen in Armenia-Russia bilateral relations in recent years have also transferred to Armenia’s relationship with the CSTO. As a result, Yerevan has frozen its participation in the organization. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan [said](#) that the next logical step would be the country’s withdrawal from the CSTO. With Armenia’s de facto withdrawal from the

bloc, the CSTO has lost its only member in the South Caucasus. There is no doubt that if Pashinyan's government (as well as the following governments that will replace him) continues its policy of rapprochement with the West, the withdrawal of Russia's 102 military base from Armenia will occur in the near future.

If we consider the offensive into Kursk as a stress test in terms of Russia's international prestige, then Russia's position among former allies is faltering. Only two states expressed unambiguous support for Russia: Syria and North Korea—international pariah states. The People's Republic of China, a very important strategic partner for Russia, reiterated its traditional position in [commenting on this issue](#), stating that “We will continue to maintain communication with the international community to play a constructive role for the political settlement of the crisis.”

Tokayev's new idea

These days, as the Russia-Ukraine war has entered a new phase, Kazakhstan's Tokayev has managed to achieve greater visibility. In his [article](#) *The Renaissance of Central Asia: Towards Sustainable Development and Prosperity*, published on August 8 in local media, Tokayev outlined his vision of the region's development prospects, proposing cooperation among the countries of the region in the area of defense and security policy:

In light of the ongoing complexity of the military and political situation along the periphery of Central Asia, there is a clear need for collaboration in the realm of defense policy and security. It is particularly relevant to establish a regional security architecture, including the development of a catalogue of security risks for Central Asia and measures to prevent them. The primary objectives for the states in the region are the formation of an indivisible security zone in

Central Asia, the pursuit of comprehensive strategies for addressing pivotal concerns in the fight against traditional and emerging threats, the development of response and prevention measures, and active collaboration with the United Nations and other international and regional organizations in this domain.

It is difficult to say whether Tokayev envisioned the creation of a new regional military alliance when he put forward the idea of cooperation in the sphere of military security. Creating such an alliance at the present stage is not an easy task, as some countries in the region continue to have border disputes and different views on a number of regional and global issues. Turkmenistan, for example, has a policy of self-isolation and neutrality. The key point is that Kazakhstan does not view the CSTO as a necessary organization in terms of ensuring regional security. It is not by chance that he did not name the CSTO when listing in his post the successful multilateral structures of which regional states are founding members. Everyone knows that this organization, also known as "Putin's little non-Nato," is one of the tools in Moscow's hands to ensure Russia's interests in the post-Soviet space. Tokayev, on the other hand, sets as an important task the harmonization of the interests of the countries of the region themselves on regional security issues, the definition of a joint approach and the implementation of a coordinated policy.

Although Kazakhstan is Russia's ally on paper, it has a multi-vector foreign policy. It is expanding bilateral ties with other major power centers and states (China, India, Japan, the United States, the European Union) without tying the region to external powers. It is worth recalling that Uzbekistan, another important player in the region, is not a CSTO member. Although these states are interested in maintaining the current level of bilateral relations with Russia, they are seeking to pursue independent foreign, economic and security policies, without showing as much enthusiasm as before for

active participation in institutions Moscow dominates.