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The CSTO in 2017 and how Russia exploits its allies



A high profile appointment in April this year passed by largely unnoticed: the Collective Security Treaty Organization — the CSTO — appointed a new Secretary General. Now heading up the organization is a former Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Armenia, Colonel-General Yuri Khachaturov. The Secretary-General's mandate rotates every three years in accordance with the Cyrillic alphabetical order. However, rotating leadership is not indicative of any meaningful changes to the organization. Irrespective of which country's representative has been appointed secretary general, the CSTO primarily continues to bolster Russian influence in the post-Soviet space.

Twenty-five years have elapsed since the signing of the Collective Security Treaty and 15 have gone by since the CSTO was established. Still, the organization has failed to iron out security problems of the constituent CSTO member countries. Its anti-terrorist and military capabilities are somewhat coy and deployments have been limited to military training exercises. Its peacekeeping potential could hardly be said to be "in demand" and its operations aimed at combating drug trafficking and illegal migration are ineffective due to the widespread publicity these actions attract. Its cooperation with other international organizations is limited. No

results have been achieved since the signing of the resolution on cooperation between the CSTO and the UN seven years ago. There is practically zero cooperation with the SCO which has a similar composition. CSTO member states use the organization to procure Russian military equipment and as a way of getting free education for its military personnel in Russia's military academies. The CSTO budget - approximately 250 million rubles (less than 4.5 million dollars) speaks volumes about the role of the CSTO. For example, the budget of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum is higher by a factor of seven. Such an organization cannot command serious attention.

Nevertheless, this does not prevent Russia from using the CSTO to strengthen and advance its policy, albeit with limited success. None of Russia's allies participate in Russia's military pursuits. CSTO member states do not even support Russian policy officially.

Belarus perceived the Kremlin's policy in Ukraine as a tragedy. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of Belarus [stated](#) that Ukraine should remain a sovereign, independent and territorially integral state. The Presidential Administration of Belarus [pointed out](#) that the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine was accompanied by the Karelo-Finnish Soviet Socialist Republic joining Russia and that in the case of the redrawing of borders, the Karelia issue may re-emerge. (Unlike the Kremlin), President Alexander Lukashenko openly acknowledged the new Ukrainian government and called for Ukraine to remain territorially integral. Belarus later shifted its stance, recognizing ["the consequences of Crimea changing hands today as de facto"](#).

The President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, was overtly displeased by Russia's policy on Crimea since there are whole regions inhabited by a predominantly Russian-speaking population in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan's leader [spoke in favor of the territorial integrity of Ukraine](#) during a telephone conversation with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and stated that he was convinced that the Ukrainian crisis should be resolved through all-party talks. At present, the MFA of Kazakhstan acknowledges that a final settlement with respect to the Crimea's status is yet to be reached.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan face no threat from separatist sentiments, although both countries are economically dependent on Russia. Still, Dushanbe and Bishkek cannot support Russian policy as were they to support Moscow, they would effectively forego access to Western investment and technologies, indispensable to these countries which have weak economies.

Armenia alone supported "Crimea's right to self-determination" (not least because of the semblance of the issue to that of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, which is seeking to gain independence).

As for Russia's policy in Syria, only Belarus unequivocally supports Moscow in this regard. Despite some infrequently uttered words of support, other states do not vote in favor of Russia's policy at the UN General Assembly. Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Armenia abstained from voting on the issue and Tajikistan opted not to vote at all.

However, Russia needs no approval from its allies when implementing its policy. It exploits its allies in pursuit of its own aims. Russia uses Belarus in order to exert military pressure on Europe and NATO policy to exert pressure on Belarus. Thus, Russia will conduct military exercises in Belarus as part of its Zapad-2017 operation. Nearly 13 thousand participants will be transported to the territory of Belarus by 4 thousand rail cars. Estonian Defense Minister Margus Tsahkna [said](#) that Moscow could use these drills, organized along with the powers in Minsk, in order to deploy soldiers in Belarus whereas Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine Oleksandr Turchynov [claimed](#) that the joint Russian-Belarusian military exercises Zapad-2017 might serve as a dry run for an offensive against Ukraine.

Nevertheless, this could hardly be the case since the main objective underlying the maneuvers is to elicit a reaction from NATO. [Sergey Shoigu noted](#) that the premise behind these military undertakings appertains to the assumption that NATO's presence proximate to the borders of the Union State would increase. Hence, it can be assumed that the primary aim will not be to engage mythical illegal armed formations in combat but to conduct drills aimed at honing actions in preparation for a military stand-off with NATO. Russia's actions in this regard could, in fact, be perceived as a sub-rosa plot to use the territory of Belarus in the case of a conflict with NATO.

The President of Belarus [speaks](#) of the defensive nature of the military exercises and invites NATO representatives to take part in them, which could be construed as rather telling given the context of Lukashenko's own concerns. Russia engages Belarusian militarily under the pretext of the NATO threat. Cooperation between the Armed Forces of Belarus and Russia has recently intensified. Over a hundred separate joint initiatives were carried out in 2016 alone.

[Russia spooks Belarus](#) with talk of the US missile defense system deployed in Europe and NATO enlargement into Eastern European countries. As a counter measure, Russia has integrated Belarus' air force into the joint air defense system of the Union State. Russia has equipped Belarus with S-300 and S-400 long-range surface-to-air missile systems free of charge since the Belarusian air defense is the best cover for air space on Moscow's western fringes.

But that's not all. [Russia plans](#) to deploy Iskander-M missile systems and set up airbases armed with Su-35 fighters in Belarus. What's more, experts suggest that China, India or Iran should become CSTO partners in response to NATO initiatives - something [Belarus has already agreed to](#).

Russia will take advantage of the Syrian conflict in order to increase its influence on CSTO member states. Thus, CSTO Acting Secretary General Valery Semerikov [stated](#) at the Moscow Conference on International Security that ISIS militants had left Syria and Iraq for Afghanistan. Therefore, Russia has an opportunity to assist Tajikistan against the backdrop of the deteriorating situation at the Tajik-Afghan border. A plan was hatched to bolster CSTO military presence in the border area and establish a joint service center for maintaining multifarious armored personnel carriers and infantry combat vehicles.

Moreover, Russia seeks to establish a collective CSTO aviation force that would incorporate fighter, bomber, transport, and reconnaissance aircraft. This large-scale project will certainly involve the deployment of air defense and communication systems in addition to a signal corps and other components.

A proposal was made several years ago to establish a single regional air defense system in Central Asia. However, even one of the Presidential Russian Institute for Strategic Studies' (RISI) own employees publicly stated that [no country other than Russia has any real interest](#) in the unification of air defense systems. Central Asian states are rather more interested in managing their own air defense systems (e.g. Kazakhstan) or upgrading their armaments (e.g. Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan) at Russia's expense, yet Russia has no intention of relinquishing control, nor of funding the maintenance of the air defense capabilities of Central Asian states.

Russia has failed to reach an agreement on these issues with Central Asian states so far. All CSTO member states face economic uncertainty and none are in a position to cough up the cash for these projects. Still, Russia continues to intimidate its CSTO partners. In particular, Russia points to the [threat of color revolutions](#) organized by the West aimed at capitalizing on the advanced ages of the region's leaders. An atmosphere of fear has been fomented and the idea is instilled in CSTO member states that security can only be achieved by making concessions to the Russian military machine. A CSTO Crisis Response Center is being established in Moscow to facilitate the rapid exchange of information between military structures. It is to be founded on the basis of the National Defense Management Center of the Russian Federation, meaning that CSTO member states will, in fact, report to Russia on ensuing domestic situations and follow Moscow's recommendations.

The CSTO is merely a Russian policy tool employed in the post-Soviet space, lacking inherent value as a stand-alone body. Moscow allies that are constituent members of the CSTO cannot publicly support Russia since they are not immune to international pressure. Still, differences in opinion have proven insufficient to drastically alter foreign policy vectors or attitudes towards integration projects with Russia. CSTO member states are economically weak and as a consequence, remain dependent on the Kremlin - a fact that the latter will no doubt be all too aware of.

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