

How the CSTO Can (and Cannot) Help NATO

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In preparation for the 2014 withdrawal of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops from Afghanistan, there have been numerous discussions about what comes next. While a role for Russia and Central Asian states is often considered, a role for the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is typically overlooked.¹ Afghanistan is on its way to becoming a missed opportunity for NATO-CSTO cooperation. This, however, does not mean there is no agenda at all for cooperation between the two alliances.

Created in 2002, the CSTO has consistently sought to establish official relations with NATO. Despite its willingness to establish official relations with NATO, however, the CSTO is rather ambivalent toward the Alliance. CSTO declarations less often mention the possibility of cooperation with NATO than they do the Alliance's expansion and deployment of anti-ballistic missile defense systems in Europe.

For its part, NATO has been reluctant to work with the CSTO. NATO does not want to recognize the CSTO, something that is perceived by its members as a purely ideological Cold War holdover. NATO members have also not seen significant results from CSTO activities and tend to think it easier to negotiate significant issues bilaterally with Russia, which dominates the organization. In recent years, U.S. officials have not entirely excluded the possibility of cooperating with the CSTO on certain concrete issues like Afghanistan, but this has not translated into any clear efforts to do so.

In any case, Western officials expect the CSTO to first prepare a detailed agenda with a concrete program. CSTO representatives say they have made some concrete suggestions. These are outlined in **Table 1**.

¹ The CSTO's members include Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan is a former member (joined 2006, withdrew 2012). Afghanistan (2013) and Serbia (2013) are observers in the CSTO Parliamentary Assembly. The CSTO's main objectives are collective defense, the fight against extremism, terrorism, drug trafficking, illegal migration from third countries, crisis reaction, peacekeeping, and reaction to emergency situations and natural and man-made disasters.

Table 1: CSTO Views on Areas of Possible Cooperation with NATO

Year	Areas of Possible Cooperation
2007 ²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counterterrorism and counternarcotics • WMD nonproliferation • Arms export control • Post-conflict assistance (<i>obustroystvo</i>) to Afghanistan • Border management
2012 ³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counterterrorism and counternarcotics • Restoring stability in Afghanistan; preventing threats from its territory; securing transit for ISAF needs; training and equipping Afghan security forces • Joint reaction to man-made and natural disasters • Mutual assistance in case of evacuation of official diplomatic missions and CSTO/NATO citizens in crisis situations • Exchange of information about the main aspects of CSTO and NATO activities
2013 ⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint efforts to stabilize Afghanistan and neutralize threats from Afghan territory • Regular exchange of information about political and military developments in conflict-prone regions, discussion of possible joint steps • Elaboration and implementation of coordinated measures to counter drug trafficking, extremism, and terrorism and to provide information security⁵ • Planning of coordinated steps to eliminate consequences of man-made or natural accidents or disasters • Creation of a mechanism of joint discussion of CSTO and NATO's conceptual approaches to security • Exchange of information between CSTO and NATO about collective rapid reaction forces • Peacekeeping

CSTO views on a possible agenda for cooperation with NATO have shifted in recent years, illustrating a gradual change in the organization's priorities and self-identification. In 2007, the CSTO proposed to cooperate with NATO on hard security issues like WMD and arms export control, despite the fact that such issues are not high priorities for the organization, which has only adopted political declarations on the subjects. Such suggestions indicate that the CSTO perceives NATO more as a classic military bloc and/or that Russia, as a nuclear state and large arms seller, is the main

² "Armenia is a reliable, time-tested partner in the system of alliance relations among the CSTO member-states," *Novosti-Armenia*, January 18, 2007 (<http://www.newsarmenia.ru/exclusive/20070118/41627762.html>).

³ "Council of the CSTO Foreign Affairs Ministers adopted a declaration about cooperation with NATO," *RIA Novosti*, April 6, 2012 (http://ria.ru/defense_safety/20120406/619406089.html).

⁴ Vladimir Bogdanov, "CSTO is ready to cooperate with NATO," *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, May 23, 2013 (<http://www.rg.ru/2013/05/23/odkb-site.html>).

⁵ In Russia, "information security" is not equivalent to "cyber security." The term "information security" is mostly used in relation to information warfare or extremist information on the Web.

agenda-setter within the CSTO. The 2010 NATO Strategic Concept addresses WMD nonproliferation, arms control, and disarmament, but all these issues are already subjects of NATO-Russia or bilateral U.S.-Russia cooperation. There is no need to create yet another platform for cooperation, especially since Russia is the only CSTO member that can support a real dialogue on hard security.

In 2012, hard security issues disappeared from the agenda of potential CSTO-NATO cooperation. They were replaced by an emphasis on conflict resolution and crisis management, to which in 2013 peacekeeping was added. But what specifically can the CSTO offer in the fields of crisis management and peacekeeping?

The CSTO has four types of collective forces. These include two regional groups of military forces (Russia-Belarus and Russia-Armenia), prepared to react to external military aggression; a 4,000-strong Collective Rapid Deployment Force for Central Asia; a 20,000-strong Collective Rapid Reaction Force (both of which have been designed to react to crises short of interstate conflicts); and collective peacekeeping forces, including about 3,500 soldiers and military officers and more than 800 civilian police officers (exact figures for all types of forces are not publicly available).

Since the CSTO will not let NATO participate in conflict resolution or crisis management on CSTO territory, cooperation could occur only in out-of-area peacekeeping operations. Just one of the above forces is designed for such operations – the peacekeeping forces.

Moreover, there are two important legal limitations on CSTO peacekeeping activities. The first is that participation is voluntary, which could lead to a repetition of the situation from the 1990s when Russia bore the main “peacekeeping burden” (as official documents put it).

The second is that the CSTO allows its forces to take part in UN-mandated out-of-area peacekeeping operations only following an official request from conflicting parties to conduct such an operation. Unfortunately, today’s peacekeeping operations often include some element of enforcement, i.e., operations are conducted without the consent of one or both parties. The UN principle of “responsibility to protect” also implies a violation of sovereignty, when an international intervention is made to protect a state’s population without an official request. The CSTO will not participate in peace enforcement or other operations under the responsibility-to-protect principle.

At the same time, there is not all that much interest in the UN for CSTO peacekeepers. A Memorandum of Understanding between the UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations and the CSTO Secretariat was signed in September 2012, but it is just an agreement to exchange information. In June 2012, Russian media speculated that CSTO peacekeepers could be sent to Syria, but this was a theoretical discussion devoid of any outcome. Taking into account the above mentioned legal constraints, cooperation between the CSTO and NATO in peacekeeping would be possible only in operations requested by conflicting parties. However, NATO does not specialize in such kinds of operations.

Afghanistan is the most obvious sphere for cooperation between the CSTO and NATO. However, neither organization has rushed to work together. NATO prefers

bilateral negotiations with individual CSTO members for military transit and bases. For a long time, the same was true for the CSTO. Only in 2011 did CSTO members agree that the deployment of non-CSTO military bases on the territory of CSTO members requires collective approval. For its part, Russia prefers to cooperate with NATO and the United States on Afghanistan on a bilateral basis. In general, CSTO political declarations tend to mention Afghanistan separately from other possible spheres of cooperation with NATO.

This is not surprising. The interests of the two organizations in Afghanistan are rather divergent. For the CSTO, Afghanistan is not a possible field of military activity but an external threat; it cares more about extremism and drug trafficking via Central Asia and is ready to act only in its area of responsibility. By contrast, NATO operates on Afghan territory, is interested in Afghanistan's internal stability, and does not prioritize the fight against drug trafficking. The most the two organizations can do, it seems, is to engage in an exchange of information, which could in fact become a highly useful sphere of cooperation.

Recommendations

In general, there are three areas of cooperation that have some potential. The first are information exchanges about general activities and collective forces. Such exchanges can be a first step toward greater transparency and trust. Currently, mutual stereotypes impede cooperation. NATO perceives the CSTO as a club of dictators who want to use the organization to safeguard their regimes. CSTO members tend to see NATO as an interventionist actor that wants to overthrow non-democratic regimes and gain strategic influence in the post-Soviet region. Institutionalized exchange of information and personal contacts would allow for a lessening of mistrust between the two alliances.

A second area of cooperation could be the elimination of the consequences of natural and man-made disasters. This type of cooperation is politically neutral, as there is always a request from a suffering state for assistance. Despite numerous annual exercises, the CSTO has yet to participate in real operations of this sort. Cooperation in the field would provide a test of the CSTO's true operational capabilities.

The third area is post-conflict peace-building and state-building. Since opportunities for CSTO out-of-area conflict settlement are rather restricted, post-conflict activities represent a good alternative for the CSTO to test its mettle. Recent international interventions demonstrate that the military stage of operations is the easiest, thanks to the West's military preponderance. The largest problems occur at the stage of state-building, which is a long-term process that does not provide a clear exit strategy for intervening forces.

The CSTO would not want to intervene at the stage of peace enforcement, but it could join in at later stages of state-building. Russia and other CSTO members have useful experiences they can draw upon to work with troubled states. They are young, formerly or still authoritarian, multiethnic, and multi-religious states with problems of separatism—in other words, they continue to undergo their own processes of state- and nation-building. The problems they deal with internally are usually present in the troubled countries where the West intervenes. As well, Central Asian states are much

closer than Western states to the mentality and level of social development in, say, Afghanistan. The CSTO can serve as a kind of “interpreter” of Western best practices for post-conflict states.

As for Afghanistan, in particular, the CSTO can train and equip local security forces (Central Asian states can be particularly helpful thanks to their similar strategic cultures) and it can foster intergroup dialogue (drawing, for example, on the experience of the Tajik civil war). In the end, such sharing of experience can also work both ways: in working with Afghanistan, CSTO members might come to better understand their own problems and become more effective at solving them.