



The Kazakhstan-Russia Axis: Shaping CSTO Transformation

BY ROGER N. MCDERMOTT
*Senior International Fellow,
Foreign Military Studies Office*

United Kingdom

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Roger N. McDermott is a graduate of the University of Oxford specializing in defense and security issues in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). He is a Senior Fellow in Eurasian Military Studies, Jamestown Foundation, Washington DC. McDermott is on the editorial board of Central Asia and the Caucasus and the scientific board of the Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies. His articles appear in scholarly journals including the Journal of Slavic Military Studies, and his weekly assessments of security developments in Central Asia, Eurasia Daily Monitor (Jamestown Foundation), are read by policy planners. He is also the co-editor of the book, Russian Military Reform 1992-2002 (Frank Cass: London/Portland, 2003). McDermott is also conducting extensive policy oriented research into Russian defense reform, and will publish a book on the ‘new look’ Russian armed forces, as well as a chapter in a forthcoming Routledge book based on an FOI conference in Sweden on Russian military development (October 4-5, 2010), in which he examines Russian perspectives on network-centric warfare (Roger McDermott, Bertil Nygren and Carolina Vendil-Pallin (editors), The Russian Armed Forces in Transition: Economic, Geopolitical and Institutional Uncertainties, (Routledge: London), 2011).

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Senior International Fellow,
Foreign Military Studies
Office

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PHOTO: Heads of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) member states. Photo by Presidential Press and Information Office. [CC-BY 3.0 (www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Kremlin.ru

Western perceptions and analyses of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO): Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) are often framed in terms

of viewing it as “Russian-led,” implying that the other members are either subordinate to Moscow or at least lacking in real influence. While none of the other members would deny that Russia possesses greater military and economic power, the “Russian-led” characterization needs to be revised. This can be demonstrated not only by reference to initiatives emanating from beyond Moscow but more particularly through the role and influence of Kazakhstan. Similarly, critics of the CSTO frequently assert that it is a body in which though its members participate their cooperation is more virtual than real.¹ Differences in perception are important to recognize, no more so than in the fact that CSTO members place far greater emphasis on the organization than on their cooperative arrangements with NATO. It is no coincidence, for example, that the military doctrines of Kazakhstan (2007) and Russia (2010) stress the importance of the CSTO.² In the following analysis Kazakhstan as a facilitator of change is assessed in terms of questioning the common misperception that the CSTO is largely dominated by Moscow. Viewed from Kazakhstan’s perspective, the need to transcend the symbolism of the CSTO’s collective defense theme and promote ways in which it might meet real transnational and emerging security challenges is both real and urgent.

During a roundtable discussion in Almaty in October 2011 at the Faculty of International Relations of the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, the nature of the country’s role and influence within the CSTO was explored. These discussions proved invaluable in terms of understanding the critical role Kazakhstan plays within the regional security body.³ The drivers of change in the CSTO preceded the Arab Spring in 2011. Factors influencing the formation of the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces (*Kollektivnyye Sily Operativnogo Reagirovaniya* –KSOR) in 2009, widening the missions for CSTO multilateral military forces include perceived shifts in the nature of future warfare, Russia’s reform of its armed forces initiated in October 2008, and assessments of the threat environment among CSTO



[left to right] President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan, President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko, President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of Kyrgyzstan Rosa Otunbayeva, President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev, President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon, President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov, and CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha

members. The global changes to Russia's conventional armed forces, triggered by the reform that began in late 2008, partly reflect General Staff views on future warfare notably that the means and methods of conducting warfare have fundamentally moved from the industrial to the information era. Kazakhstani expert analysis of trends in the nature of warfare reflects such assessments. Consequently, given the close defense relationship between Russia and Kazakhstan it is natural that both would play a role in reshaping the CSTO and its military capabilities to meet new challenges.⁴

Following the regime change in Kyrgyzstan in April 2010, displacing President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, neighboring states and international security organizations were anxious about the country's possible descent into chaos.⁵ While the political crisis in Kyrgyzstan was long in the making and its regime change caused concern among numerous actors, the eruption of ethnic-related violence in southern Kyrgyzstan on June 11, 2010, not only threatened the fragile state but also risked destabilizing Central Asia. Many looked to the CSTO for action to stabilize the country, especially as KSOR seemed suited for this purpose. For Western analysts the refusal by the CSTO to act in response to requests for assistance from the interim Kyrgyz government prompted predictable hand-wringing about the ineffectiveness of the CSTO. The Kyrgyz crisis exposed complex perspectives and perceptions about the role of the CSTO. Not only were Western analysts and policymakers confused about the CSTO or the potential of KSOR, so too were CSTO members' senior officials –not least Kyrgyz President Rosa Otunbayeva.⁶

CSTO transformation was in progress prior to June 2010, marked by the formation of the KSOR. Chairing the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010, Kazakhstan was proactive in raising the Kyrgyz question on the agendas of various international bodies. Astana's role in CSTO transformation was closely coordinated with Moscow as its closest defense and security ally and also predated the events of June 2010, rooted in numerous shared concerns which proved vital in formulating modifications to the CSTO. Initiatives to strengthen the organization must be viewed in a wider strategic context.

Ballot Versus Full Consensus

At a practical level, changes to the CSTO, in the estimation of some members, were necessitated by the organization's experience in the aftermath of the crisis in Kyrgyzstan in June 2010. This essentially required amending the charter of the CSTO, to permit military intervention to occur in any similar crisis in the future. It was precisely these issues that were addressed during the CSTO summit in Moscow on December 10, 2010. Among the 33 documents signed by its members, excluding Uzbekistan, critical amendments to the Collective Security Treaty (1992) and the CSTO Charter (2002) reportedly allow such a political decision authorizing the use of force to be taken on the basis of a ballot among member states, rather than on achieving full consensus.⁷

Such changes effectively mark the evolution of the organization from orientation exclusively towards collective defense to cooperative defense arrangements. Although other factors played a role in dissuading members from acting in June 2010, it appears that the principle stumbling block was the legality of any action, since the CSTO was designed to protect its members from *external* rather than *internal* aggression. This question concerning the legitimacy of such intervention was raised repeatedly in statements by CSTO heads of state. Kazakhstan does not interpret these changes as presaging the emergence of the CSTO in the role of



December 2010 CTSO Collective Security Council meeting. Photo by Presidential Press and Information Office. [CC-BY 3.0 (www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Kremlin.ru

regional policeman, and, in any case, action by the security body would still require consent by the host nation.⁸

Prior to the summit, the Kremlin advocated “streamlining” the CSTO crisis-reaction mechanism. Changes were planned in relation to all the major documents of the organization, to include amending its founding charter. Joint measures would enhance the capability “to neutralize threats to security, territorial integrity and sovereignty,” and create an efficient “collective security system” to protect members’ “security, stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty.” Moscow also disclosed in advance of the summit that CSTO heads of state would “consider streamlining the collective security system, developing military-economic and military-technical cooperation, military buildup, streamlined reaction to emergency situations, information security, and several organizational and administrative issues of CSTO operations.”⁹

The underlying aim of the summit therefore was to rectify the dysfunctional nature of the CSTO at the political-military level, strengthening the capacity of the organization to respond to a crisis, particularly in Central Asia. Although assessments of the long-term security environment may have influenced this process, not least in reference to Afghanistan’s stabilization and the scheduled drawdown of NATO forces by 2014-15, it appears that its key driver was coordination between Moscow and Astana on the need to further develop CSTO peacekeeping capabilities and make the organization more viable. This occurred in the context of NATO freezing its relations with Russia following the Russia-Georgia War in August 2008. Moscow and Astana share the aspiration to achieve a formal relationship between NATO and the CSTO, and in the case of Kazakhstan this is entirely consistent with its multivector foreign policy. Naturally, there were differences among members, since, for example, Belarus could not constitutionally deploy forces beyond its territory, while Uzbekistan remained opposed to any steps to further “militarize” the CSTO. Bishkek and Dushanbe were largely supportive of measures to circumvent a potential impasse preventing the Collective Security Council (CSC) authorizing action in a crisis within the region. Kyrgyzstan’s President Roza Otunbayeva agreed to the changes in the CSTO, stressing that Bishkek perceives the CSTO as playing an “irreplaceable” role in deterring external aggression against its members, including illegal immigration and drug trafficking. Otunbayeva repeated her view during the summit that, in response to the request in June 2010, she had expected CSTO involvement in handling the crisis.¹⁰ Tajikistan’s President Emomali Rahmon fully supported the development of KSOR, adding that ensuring stability in member states should be one of CSTO’s “main tasks.”¹¹ Armenia was also tacitly supportive, while the driving force for change came from Moscow and Astana.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev stated that, based on its existing “legal mandate,” the CSTO could not intervene in Kyrgyzstan’s June crisis, and argued that this exposed the need for the organization to change its legal framework to meet “modern challenges.” Medvedev said that, in its capacity as chairman of the CSC, Russia proposed making such changes. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed this was necessary to provide “collective security on the territory of the former Soviet Union.”¹²

Medvedev spoke in broad terms about expanding the military capabilities of the CSTO, moving away from the need for consensus as a precondition for action and replacing this with a “limited format” – permitting members to opt out of any proposed military operation. More specifically, Medvedev talked about a “new mechanism” for action by the 20,000-strong KSOR, including the 3,500 CSTO peacekeeping forces. CSTO Spokesman, Vladimir Zaynetdinov, confirmed that the documents signed during the Moscow summit provide a legal basis for the KSOR to intervene in response to crisis situations “more effectively and rapidly,” following a decision by the CSC. Nikolai Bordyuzha, the Secretary-General of the CSTO, explained that the algorithm of CSTO action had been transformed; consensus among all members was no longer a prerequisite and CSTO intervention could occur in response to various crisis situations within member states, including acts by “extremists,” while the

KSOR might be deployed in addition to domestic military and special forces.¹³

Medvedev told the CSTO summit that Moscow had prepared a “crisis reaction mechanism” for approval, and linked this directly to the June 2010 Kyrgyz crisis: “The events in Kyrgyzstan make it utterly obvious that we should make our organization more efficient in countering modern challenges,” he said. Equally, Medvedev’s reported comments linked CSTO transformation to the need to further strengthen KSOR, which had already emerged as “a regional power that is capable of neutralizing potential threats,” based on the results of the CSTO military exercises *Vzaimodeistviye 2009* (Interaction 2009) in Kazakhstan and *Vzaimodeistviye 2010* in Russia. “The organization is finishing the forming of peacekeeping forces that will number 3,500 troops, and there are preparations underway for peacekeeping operations, including under cooperation declarations that have been signed,” Medvedev said. He also praised three CSTO operations: *Kanal*, (anti-drug trafficking) *Nelegal* (stopping illegal immigration) and *Proksi* (against cyber crime).¹⁴

Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev likewise stressed the CSTO’s role in protecting its members against external threats, stating that any CSTO use of force during domestic conflict in a member state would require host country consent. Nazarbayev rejected the assertion that the CSTO might assume any police-style functions.¹⁵ Astana’s support for these changes was certainly critical, given the profound implications concerning the internal decision-making procedure, as well as the country’s contribution to the KSOR. Nazarbayev linked the two themes, stating during the Moscow summit that KSOR required a properly worked out legal foundation. Moreover, in taking these steps to strengthen the CSTO Nazarbayev appealed for additional public diplomacy aimed at reassuring populations in member countries that deterring external threats remains its core task and, although amendments to the founding charter were agreed, this did not imply any assumption of policing functions in the affairs of member states. “Any steps towards the settlement of internal conflicts will require the will of a country which faces a threat,” Nazarbayev said.¹⁶

Uzbekistan was the only CSTO member state to oppose these changes to the organization and refused to sign the documents at the Moscow summit in December 2010. Consequently, by September 2011 an information campaign was mounted in the Russian media to present these initiatives as both new and necessary, which may have been calculated to persuade Uzbekistan to accept these plans.¹⁷ Tashkent continued to stress that the core purpose for the CSTO was to protect its members from external threats and not to interfere in acts of “domestic violence.” President Islam Karimov told the CSTO summit: “I would like once again to stress Uzbekistan’s firm conviction and position that the CSTO’s role is primarily protection of the member states from external threats rather than involvement in settling confrontations or various showdowns between the CSTO countries and within the CIS area.” Karimov also reiterated Tashkent’s opposition to CSTO involvement in the Kyrgyz crisis, partly on the same grounds, and emphasized that closing the border in response to the violence in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010 was a correct approach to preventing it from spreading. Karimov also warned the CSTO about the dangers of taking such steps in the context of existing “frozen conflicts,” such as Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁸

CSTO Summits Promote Transformation

Of course, the shift from consensus to authorization of the use of force based on a members’ ballot was of no surprise to CSTO members, not least as the groundwork had been prepared well in advance. Indeed, the process was propelled forward in late 2008, with the informal agreement in Borovoye, Kazakhstan, to create the new KSOR. However, the question of the legality of response to the Kyrgyz request for CSTO assistance in June 2010 certainly furthered this transformation. It is questionable, however, whether the legal issue alone would have prevented agreement in the CSC for some type of limited action. Equally, it would be mistaken, given the need for consensus among members set out in the CSTO charter, to lay

the blame for inaction on one single member: none were keen to pursue military action in response to the Kyrgyz crisis. Moscow was divided on the issue, seeing potential complications of becoming embroiled in inter-ethnic violence, and, as Bordyuzha later stated, there were a number of factors involved in the calculus. Tashkent opposed action and Minsk was equally adamant, not least as Bakiyev was in exile in Belarus.¹⁹ Astana was by no means an enthusiastic supporter of positively responding to Bishkek's request.

On June 26, 2010, Nazarbayev told the *Vesti v Subotu* (News on Saturday) television program that the country would not deploy military forces in Kyrgyzstan. "Any independent state should do everything to prevent the entry of alien troops into its territory. We – the Kazakhs, just practically cannot deploy troops there. Troops will enter with weapons in their hands, there will be a confrontation, Kyrgyz citizens will kill Kazakh citizens, and Kazakh citizens will kill Kyrgyz citizens. We are neighbors and will investigate afterwards who is bad and who is good," the Kazakh president said. Astana clearly wanted to avoid a military option or escalation of the crisis and offered economic support and equipment for law enforcement to re-establish order themselves, and promoted the issue within the OSCE.²⁰

Astana and Moscow recognized that, under the charter that was in force, CSTO intervention was authorized to combat an external threat, but the "legality" of intervening in the context of an internal/domestic threat was still hazy. Consequently very soon after the crisis erupted and the CSTO impasse was identified, steps were taken to rectify the organizational "weakness." It seems that this stemmed more from consideration of options had the crisis escalated. Indeed, by June 25, 2010, a CSTO provisional emergency working group was formed under the leadership of Secretary-General Bordyuzha, which travelled to Bishkek, Osh and Jalalabad. Its task was to assess the military-political situation in Kyrgyzstan and provide assistance to the country's law enforcement agencies. The working group consisted of members of the CSTO secretariat, and joint headquarters, as well as representatives from Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan (no representation from Belarus or Uzbekistan).²¹ According to the press service of the CSTO secretariat the conclusions reached by the working group would be "used for the additional recommendations for the CSTO member-states on how to support Kyrgyzstan's law enforcement forces to limit and stop the disorder and to prevent extremist activities there."²²

This working group was most likely one of the principal sources of proposals explored in more detail during the informal CSTO summit in Yerevan on August 20-21, 2010, which Tashkent refused to attend. President Medvedev described the two main issues under discussion in Yerevan as the measures taken and planned by the CSTO to help stabilize Kyrgyzstan and the formation of an "effective system of crisis management."²³ The Yerevan summit effectively agreed the range of measures to be signed at the formal CSTO summit in Moscow in December 2010. All concluding statements in Yerevan by heads of state reflected the Kyrgyz crisis. Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan stated that "The question of formation of anti-crisis response measures was discussed during the course of the meeting," while President Medvedev added that lessons based on the events in Kyrgyzstan were discussed in terms of shaping the development of the CSTO. "The decision was made to introduce amendments to CSTO statute documents by the organization's next summit meeting, to be held in Moscow in December 2010, so that the CSTO might more effectively influence crisis situations. The package of transformations



Informal meeting of heads of the CSTO member states in Yerevan, August 2010. Photo by Presidential Press and Information Office. [CC-BY 3.0 (www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Kremlin.ru

being drawn up proposes that we utilize the experience of NATO, the European Union, and the United Nations,” the Russian president added.²⁴

In September 2010, Bordyuzha reported to Medvedev on how the CSTO crisis response system could be enhanced. Bordyuzha stressed that the CSTO would avoid interfering in the internal affairs of its members, and offered reassurance that police functions were not being contemplated as part of the transformation of the organization. “The problems we encountered in southern Kyrgyzstan occurred because the CSTO targets outside threats, first and foremost. The organization does not envisage use of force in response to internal problems of states. This example showed that internal problems can seriously affect the security of all states or countries of a certain region. Therefore, the most complicated task which we are drafting in the normative base is to divide CSTO activities in such a way so that it does not engage in police functions, but reacts to the threats that can seriously affect security of a state or a group of states,” Bordyuzha explained.²⁵

In an interview in *Krasnaya Zvezda* in September 2010, Bordyuzha reaffirmed the belief that the Kyrgyz crisis had compelled organizational change, a process he characterized as “fine-tuning.” He explained that, as a result of the agreement in Yerevan, the formal CSTO summit in Moscow in December 2010 would agree on draft amendments to the CSTO charter allowing a more rapid and effective response to any similar future crisis. “Specifically, we are proposing to institute within the organization the office of special representative for crisis situations. We believe that the decision to respond to a crisis should be taken by ballot procedure (*oprosnym poryadkom*). We are also proposing to create organizational and technological capabilities for emergency video teleconferencing, etc. This is a full package of wide-spectrum measures. We are currently working out their specifics and aspects of their application,” the CSTO Secretary-General confirmed.²⁶

The potentially volatile security environment within Central Asia was evidently influencing this process. A three-day conference in Moscow in September 2010 held in the CSTO joint headquarters brought together defense ministry representatives from all member states, apart from Uzbekistan. Colonel-General Anatoly Nogovitsyn, First Deputy Chief of the CSTO Joint Staff, told the conference: “The likelihood of conflicts due to political, economic, religious and other disputes remains fairly high, and their settlement without peacekeeping technologies cannot be achieved.” The conference included lectures on the military-political situation in Central Asia, practical classes on peacekeeping activities and discussions concerning introducing and using new models of non-lethal weapons. Nogovitsyn tried to explain Tashkent’s refusal to participate in the conference in terms of its preference to prepare its own peacekeeping forces at home, and that Uzbekistan seeks to follow “NATO-standards” in these formations.²⁷

Nogovitsyn’s remarks downplayed divisions within the CSTO, as well as the presence of contrasting views of peacekeeping and the capacity of members to respond to any crisis without reference to multilateral assistance. Nonetheless, the significance of the changes to the organization in the aftermath of the Kyrgyz crisis raised critical questions concerning how it might function in crisis management. Prior to these changes, any response involving military action required both participation and consensus, though most likely with an opt-out for Belarus due its constitutional constraints. After the December 2010 CSTO summit, this had shifted towards action by ballot. In terms of authorizing CSTO intervention in Central Asia the critical axis is now Moscow-Astana. A request for assistance from a Central Asian CSTO member would most likely involve bilateral discussion between Moscow and Astana before wider talks presaging a vote within the CSC; with three members already preparing to act, achieving the necessary majority would prove easier than guaranteeing full consensus. The roots of this transformation, however, lie in processes well underway before June 2010, and need to be understood in the context of the creation of the KSOR in 2009, its force structure and likely crisis deployment, as well as its relationship

to the pre-existing smaller *Kollektivnyye Sily Bistrogo Razvertyvaniya* –KSBR (Collective Rapid Deployment Forces).

CSTO Rapid Reaction Capabilities

KSOR did not replace the Collective Rapid Deployment Forces: both structures coexist. According to Bordyuzha the Rapid Deployment Forces is an antiterrorist force exclusively for Central Asia and cannot operate beyond the region, whereas the larger KSOR is a “CSTO-wide” force with a broader range of potential missions.²⁸ The CSTO already possessed the 4,500-strong Rapid Deployment Forces, tasked with operating in the Central Asian CSTO area of responsibility exclusively in an antiterrorist capacity. In September 2011, as part of the operational-strategic exercise Tsentr 2011, KSOR exercises were staged in Tajikistan, while the Rapid Deployment Forces trained in Kyrgyzstan.²⁹

However, on December 19, 2008, an informal CSTO meeting in Borovoye attended by the presidents of Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan agreed to form a new CSTO force capability to meet a wider spectrum of missions and to discuss this at an extraordinary session of the CSTO in Moscow on February 4, 2009, prior to signing a formal agreement at the Moscow summit on June 14, 2009. Arguably this process began on October 6, 2007, with an initiative to create CSTO peacekeeping capabilities, and KSOR is the logical product of that process: peacekeeping can be undertaken by the CSTO on the territories of its members without a UN mandate, or elsewhere in the CIS or globally with a UN mandate.³⁰ After completing the arduous process of laying the legal basis for CSTO peacekeeping forces, practical proposals for training these as well as the precise contribution by participating members were still under discussion in 2011, while Kazakhstan agreed to host a CSTO peacekeeping exercise in 2012.

The formation of KSOR in 2009 proved to be controversial within the CSTO, and its existence is still questioned by Tashkent on the basis of its legality and on principle. KSOR was created from the armed forces and special forces of CSTO member states, and mandated to combat organized crime and drug trafficking, and to protect populations from terrorism. The force includes the elite airborne forces and airmobile forces structures from Russia and Kazakhstan, counter-terrorism subunits, intelligence assets and peacekeeping forces. The peacekeeping forces consist of 3,500 personnel and the remaining 17,500 personnel assigned to KSOR include non-defense-ministry armed forces. Bordyuzha refers to the KSOR being used to localize “small conflicts.” However, if larger-scale conflict erupts it may play a role, although it would not be the decisive force, and would require large combined-arms groupings, that is, the Russian-Belarusian, Russian-Armenian and Russian-Kazakhstani groupings in the so-called western vector, South Caucasus and Central Asia respectively.³¹

In November 2009, Kazakhstan Foreign Ministry Spokesman Yerzhan Ashikbayev outlined the main purposes for which the new CSTO force was formed: “the strengthening of the security of the countries of the CSTO against the background of existing and potential threats, including terrorism, extremism, narcotics trafficking, the prevention and elimination of emergency situations of a natural and technogenic

character, and the provision for the effective participation of the CSTO in the maintenance of peace.”³² According to a CSTO press release, KSOR can engage in operations to disarm and eliminate illegal armed formations, suppress acts of terrorism, eliminate organized criminal groups, and assist in the security of public facilities or special operations to detect, remove, dispose, transport and destroy explosives.³³

Before examining the force structure, exercises and possible future trends in strengthening KSOR, it is worth understanding that during the early controversy surrounding its creation members were divided on the level of contribution they might make and mission types, as well as the more difficult questions relating to the precise circumstances that would trigger its operational deployment. At every step along this organizational transformation, Astana and Moscow were the main advocates and garnered wider support for the initiative, while initially Minsk and Tashkent acted as the main opponents of forming KSOR. Even after the December 2010 CSTO Moscow summit, Tashkent continued to question the legitimacy of all the documents signed in relation to KSOR, including later amendments to the CSTO charter.

Following the Russian Duma’s and Federation Council’s agreeing to the relevant documentation on December 8, and December 15, 2010, respectively, President Medvedev signed the law ratifying the forming of the KSOR. The Kremlin considers that the force can repel military aggression, launch special operations against terrorists, and combat extremism, as well as deploy to cope with the aftermath of emergency situations, including natural disasters and industrial accidents. The bedrock of the force consists of elements from the elite Russian airborne forces (*Vozdushno-Desantnyye Voiska* –VDV) and Kazakhstan’s airmobile forces. Russia contributes the VDV 98th Airborne Division (Ivanovo) and 31st Air Assault Brigade (AAB) (Ulyanovsk), while Kazakhstan offers its 37th AAB (Taldykurgon).³⁴ Both countries provide special forces – Kazakhstani Arystan and Russian Rys and Bars, along with combat air support. Other CSTO members contribute much smaller forces (Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan each provide one battalion) while Uzbekistan refuses to participate. Belarus ratified its participation in KSOR on May 26, 2010 and contributes 2,000 personnel, including the 5th Spetsnaz Brigade, an interior ministry Almaz unit and a KGB Alpha antiterrorist unit, as well as an additional emergencies ministry unit.³⁵

Independent Russian military analysts note that Kazakhstan has contributed the strongest and “most serious” forces to KSOR, apart from Russia, and that the overall force may be regarded as a *de facto* Russo-Kazakh structure functioning under the CSTO.³⁶ Moreover, the paramilitary dimensions of the KSOR have been rehearsed in exercises in Rostov Oblast, Russia in June 2010. Kobalt 2010 was organized under the CSTO members’ interior ministries and involved interior ministry troops and specialist subunits from Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan.³⁷

KSOR faces serious challenges in terms of manpower; Major-General Aleksandr Lentsov, the Commander of VDV 98th Division, stated that the overall conscript-contract personnel balance in KSOR is 50-50. However, the proportion is much higher in Kazakhstan’s 37th AAB, at 80 percent contract personnel, demonstrating the level of importance Astana attaches to further strengthening the military capabilities and readiness of KSOR.³⁸

In October 2009, the Russian defense ministry supplied gratis specially designed uniforms for the KSOR. The new uniform (grey-beige) was manufactured in St. Petersburg using nanotechnology processes to enhance its camouflage qualities. In an article in *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kuryer*, Alexey Matveev cited Russian Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov as reporting to President Medvedev that the color of the uniform and its pixeling was designed “based on the peculiarities of the terrain where KSOR will be used. That terrain consists of mountains and desert. Using computer-aided selection, the most unnoticeable color was chosen.” Matveev suggested its design focused on Central Asia, although since its creation KSOR military exercises have been held in southern Russia and Kazakhstan, and an exercise will be staged in Armenia in 2012.³⁹



Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev in KSOR uniform at Cooperation-2009 KSOR military exercises. Photo by Presidential Press and Information Office. [CC-BY 3.0 (www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Kremlin.ru

Of much greater significance are questions related to command and equipment. While there is effectively no organic agreed command structure, exercises, as well as statements by key CSTO officials, indicate that in practical terms the command structure is based on the Russian VDV. General Nogovitsyn suggested in December 2010 that, given the VDV’s experience and mobility, they would be most suited to commanding KSOR: “The most acceptable option is for the VDV division commander to become the Collective Force commander, while his deputies are appointed from among the leaders of subunits from the armed forces of the CSTO member countries taking part in the operation.”⁴⁰ Indeed, this view is supported by reference to KSOR exercises where the commander of the VDV force participating becomes the KSOR commander, with the commander of Kazakhstan’s 37th AAB, along with other commanders from the participating force elements, acting as his deputies. It is likely that the VDV commander would liaise with the VDV commander in Ryazan, while his Kazakhstani deputy would be in contact with the commander of the Air Mobile Forces HQ in Almaty; overall operational control of the force structure comes through Moscow.⁴¹ This is also consistent with the VDV being subordinated to the Russian General Staff, rather than under operational control by West or Center Military District/Joint Strategic Command (*Obyedinennyye Strategicheskoye Komandovanie –OSK*).⁴²

Although Russia’s VDV and Kazakhstan’s Air Mobile Forces are more lightly armed than other formations in their respective national armed forces and, consequently, easier to reequip, the KSOR reportedly still faces a period of military modernization. In order to facilitate interoperability among these disparate forces, some level of uniformity in procurement is required, as well as regular exercises. Weaponry, military hardware and special equipment among CSTO members are characterized by varying degrees of dated or obsolete weapons and equipment. Therefore, a draft intergovernmental agreement was formulated in Moscow to equip KSOR with modern weapons and equipment. An agreement that Moscow should be responsible for this process was reached within the framework of the fourth International Exhibition of Arms and Military Equipment (MVSV 2010) in July 2010. This process is likely to prove complex and lengthy, given the preparation of the program involving ministries and departments among the CSTO members, as well as domestic defense industry capacities.⁴³ Part of this modernization will involve ensuring the forces are equipped with modern nonlethal weaponry, which featured as part of tactical combat episodes during *Vzaimodeistviye 2010*. Drawing on Russian combat experience in Chechnya, the use of non-lethal weaponry including smoke and stun grenades as well as crowd dispersal grenades, is being considered as part of the future inventory of the KSOR.⁴⁴

KSOR's Future Role

KSOR military exercises *Vzaimodeistviye* 2010 were held on October 25-28, 2010, in the Chebarkul training range in Chelyabinsk, Russia. The exercises were supervised by the VDV Deputy Commander, Major-General Aleksandr Lentsov and involved a joint Kazakh-Russian airdrop of 400 personnel (a company of 52 Kazakhstani servicemen in 37th AAB and 348 Russian personnel from 217th Parachute Regiment/98th Airborne Division) and nine BMD-2 airborne combat vehicles from 12 IL-76 military transport aircraft. The exercise included a total of 1,700 military personnel from all CSTO member states, apart from Uzbekistan, with Belarusian officers participating in the command-staff exercise. Around 270 pieces of combat and special military hardware, and 30 aircraft and helicopters (frontal, army and transport aviation) were used. KSOR rehearsed antiterrorist operations and containment of a local conflict, while the simulated use of non-lethal weapons in populated areas also featured in the exercise.⁴⁵



Chebarkul training ground. Centre-2011 strategic military exercises. Photo by Presidential Press and Information Office. [CC-BY 3.0 (www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Kremlin.ru

In developing the exercise scenario, the names and designations of state borders, composition of military-political organizations, interstate political, economic, religious and ethnic peculiarities, interstate territorial claims and their coalitions against each other were changed. Consequently, the scenario revolved around virtual territories on the basis of Daliya (aggressor country) and Uraliya (CSTO member). In support of the exercise concept, corresponding military-political, operational-strategic and operational-tactical situations were devised in order to rehearse the use of KSOR. According to the scenario, the hypothetical opponent, Daliya, aimed at the creation of an independent state on the territory of Uraliya and the eventual absorption of the latter into the former's state. While great care was taken by the CSTO planning staffs to eradicate any possible reference to identifying a possible aggressor against the CSTO, it appears from the scenario in relation to Central Asia's most potentially volatile area, the Fergana Valley, that KSOR was activated against an adversary launching an incursion threatening the national regime: in this case, there was a clear link between the "bandits" and a sponsoring foreign power. The two phases of the exercises divided evenly over the course of the four day period, rehearsing command and control (C2) over units and subunits to interdict the advance of an enemy irregular military formation, with its later destruction culminating in live-fire practice. The 650-man illegal formation in the scenario was "armed to the teeth" in motorized vehicles. As a result, the KSOR commander ordered intelligence and reconnaissance collection and analysis prior to an engagement of these forces.⁴⁶ Rehearsing defense against an act of externally inspired aggression aimed at a CSTO member was consistent with the existing legal framework for KSOR; however, following the amendments to the CSTO charter in December 2010, it is likely that future exercises may include scenarios more akin to actual events in southern Kyrgyzstan or with a view to a possible deterioration in regional security post 2014.

Kazakhstan Air Mobile Forces Deputy Commander for Airborne Training, Colonel Viktor Zhitnik commented at length on the performance of Kazakhstani airborne units. Zhitnik noted the novelty of egressing from military transport aircraft, as personnel in 37th AAB normally use helicopters for this purpose. "Suffice to compare just two numbers, which attest to the time of egressing from transport aircraft: it is equal to 0.70 on the Il-76MD, when there already is no time to ponder what is happening,

you have to run along the ramp into the slipstream – and you are already in flight; from a helicopter – this moment ‘drags out’ for up to three seconds. While standing in front of the abyss and while looking down, it is psychologically difficult to take a step forward,” Zhitnik explained. Kazakhstani airborne personnel therefore use D-6 parachutes, and for the purposes of participating in the airdrop in Chelyabinsk had to quickly learn how to use D-10s provided by the VDV. “So, the time that had been allocated for training facilitated the mastery of a type of parachute that is new for us. Although, in fairness, I need to point out that we were familiar with the theory of the D-10. Moreover, the servicemen of the Kapchagai brigade, for example, have already tested the D-10 in exercises,” Zhitnik added. The “Kapchagai brigade” is 35th AAB collocated with Kazakhstan’s NATO-trained peacekeeping KAZBRIG.⁴⁷

Emphasizing the shared military, linguistic and historical backgrounds, Colonel Zhitnik stressed that Russian and Kazakhstani personnel have practically identical training methods and tactics for the use of airborne forces. Referring to 37th AAB assigned to KSOR, Zhitnik stated that it:

consists of 80 percent contract servicemen. The remaining 20 percent (servicemen based upon conscription) are in positions, which do not determine combat readiness. We did not even take them to the exercise. The youngest contract serviceman has served no less than a year and has undergone company, battalion and brigade tactical exercises and has up to five parachute jumps behind him. The formation successfully passed a state inspection this year and received an overall good rating largely thanks to such intensive training and the servicemen’s acquired proficiency.⁴⁸

General Nogovitsyn referred to “the postwar state of the disputed territory, on which we need to seriously work, so that a smoldering conflict would not escalate into another, harsher phase,” and highlighted the CSTO’s evolving thinking on developing peacekeeping capabilities for such situations. Senior VDV officers praised the systematic preparation for the exercise by the collective forces, and reported no serious problems in C2, tactics or subunit operations. General Lentsov rated as “good” the level of C2 organs’ combat readiness, and said ideally some additional days were needed to conduct joint work. General Lentsov also suggested that, based upon an analysis of the exercise it was agreed that the KSOR did not require a permanent C2 organ based on the CSTO joint staff model and instead advocated following the VDV-based C2 structure for KSOR.⁴⁹

Strengthening Multilateral Security

Kazakhstan pursues a policy of maximizing the potential of existing multilateral security structures. Differences exist over the future potential of the CSTO to act in any regional crisis, and some experts consider that bilateral mechanisms may prove more useful. But Kazakhstan’s location and strategic importance fuel its search for balance and avoidance of relying too heavily on any one multilateral security structure.⁵⁰

Since Astana’s initiative to develop new force capabilities within the CSTO was discussed at Borovoye in December 2008, the transformation led by Astana and Moscow has rapidly advanced. The stability of Central Asia, on the other hand, is in the vital security interests of the Russian Federation, which continues to view its close neighbor and ally as the most stable in the region. Creating KSOR and tasking the force structure with a wider range of possible missions mean that it is much more likely to be used in a real crisis than the narrowly focused Rapid Deployment Forces. The CSTO’s transformation arguably evolved more rapidly than did the necessary revision to its legal framework. The Kyrgyz crisis compelled members to reassess this imbalance and realign the legal framework to reflect the existence of the new force and potential future political mechanisms through which military action may be initiated.

This complex process remains incomplete. Gaps exist in national legislation among the CSTO members related to practical steps involved in any decision to deploy the KSOR operationally; changes and harmonization of transit rules, border issues and customs procedures, as well as the transportation of arms and military hardware across state borders, must be fully resolved.⁵¹ Challenges will persist linked to the new force itself such as C2, manpower, and the process of re-equipping the KSOR, as well as facilitating further analysis and discussion of politically sensitive issues pertaining to the circumstances in which KSOR may be deployed with careful thought about second and third-order consequences. Yet the Astana-Moscow axis has proved to be crucial in energizing members to undertake organizational transformation though continued leadership and political resolve will be required to see the process through to completion.

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