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THE FUTURE OF THE COLLECTIVE SECURITY TREATY ORGANIZATION (CSTO) AFTER FEBRUARY 24TH: IMPLICATIONS FOR RUSSIA'S HEGEMONY IN POST-SOVIET ASIA



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IMPLICATIONS FOR RUSSIA'S HEGEMONY IN POST-SOVIET ASIA

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Since February 24th, the world seems to live every minute of the war on Ukraine to its fullest. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has not only sent shockwaves through the rest of Europe but also shattered the widely held belief that the horrors of the Second World War were a thing of the past. Since then, powerful undercurrents of change have been at work in the new understanding of the security challenges of the twenty-first century. Very few in the West were able to predict that Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea would durably transform the entire international system into an increasingly bipolar confrontation between newly emerged military blocs.

Even fewer strongly warned against the temptation of thinking that the world was right back on the track of the old Cold War logic. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, former socialist republics in Central Asia have followed relatively different trajectories in terms of security interests and military relationships. Whereas Kazakhstan continues to develop strong ties with its ambitious and immensely rich Chinese neighbour, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have both gradually come closer to the United States in the field of economic, energy and security cooperation. The massive flow of Chinese investments into Kazakhstan's oil and natural gas production and the 2001 installation of a US military base in Uzbekistan are striking examples of why Russia is losing the upper hand over its previous dominions (Simonov, 2019; Umarov, 2021).

For these reasons, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO; Organizatsiya Dogovora o kolektivnoi bezopasnosti; ODKV), which was originally established at the initiative of CIS leaders, has rapidly grown into a powerful device for Russia to turn the clock back to the status quo of 1991. In this paper, we will try to examine to what extent the CSTO as a major military bloc has been deeply affected by the repercussions of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Firstly, this paper will give a glance at how post-1991 Central Asian regional institutions - such as the CIS, the SCO and lately the CSTO - tremendously helped Russia preserve and strengthen its circle of influence in the past decades. In the second part, this paper will delve into the main aspects and functions of the CSTO as a Russian-led military bastion that has gradually built itself in opposition to the US-dominated NATO bloc. Last but not least, the paper will provide an in-depth analysis of the diverging security interests of CSTO Member States while demonstrating that Russia's war on Ukraine may endanger the future of the security organisation.

After the Dissolution of the Warsaw Pact: Restarting from Scratch on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century?

In his famous speech at the Munich Security Conference of 2007, President Putin traced the new outlines of Russia's security doctrine by calling for the emergence of a new Eurasian regional order against the backdrop of NATO's eastward expansion (Culp, 2022). His ambition to restore Russia's traditional role as Central Asia's security guarantor echoes a profound fear of losing hegemony in its backyard in the face of China's voracious appetite and America's war on terror. The demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 had been experienced Maybe better to write "the war on Ukraine"? by Vladimir Putin and his contemporaries more as a psychological trauma than an entrance into the so-called era of peace and stability praised by the West. In his 2005 Annual Address to the Federal Assembly, Putin lamented the end of the USSR as "a major geopolitical disaster of the century" (President of the Russian Federation, 2005). In a vigorous attempt to heal the wounds of the past by bringing former Soviet republics back under its yoke, the Kremlin has built a vast constellation of regional security structures and economic institutions from the ashes of the Warsaw Pact which mainly serves today as a defensive line of what Putin has termed with nostalgia the "Russian World" (Русский Мир) (de Haas, 2017; Goble, 2022; Lovgren, 2022).

Established immediately after the Soviet Union fell apart, the Commonwealth of Independent States was originally conceived as an intergovernmental framework between Russia and the newly founded republics for maintaining strong cooperation ties within the military, political and economic realms. Under Yeltsin, the CIS represented a middle-ground solution for Russia to retain control over its periphery without assuming the burden of economic reconstruction (Kazsuba, 2019). Finally, the project of reunification behind the CIS fell short of expectations as Georgia withdrew in 2008 as a consequence of the Russian-Georgian War, followed later by Ukraine in reprisal for Russia's annexation of Crimea (Kubicek, 2009). Meanwhile, the 1992 Treaty of Tashkent laid the foundations for closer security arrangements among Russia and the so-called "Shanghai Five" (China, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan), thus prefiguring the resurrection of the Eastern bloc on the eve of the twenty-first century. Ultimately, the hope of rebuilding a collective security organisation of a stature equal to that of the Warsaw Pact nonetheless proved short-lived amidst the political turmoil of the 1990s.

The ascent of Yeltsin's former prime minister Vladimir Putin began a new era for Russia's vision of international affairs and its future role as regional hegemon. Putting the emphasis on the regeneration of the Russian economy through a steady increase in its raw material and oil exports, the Putin administration acknowledged the serious need for forging strong partnerships and ensuring equal and friendly relationships with former satellite republics. To these ends, the creation in 2000 of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc) as a customs union was primarily motivated by the desire of Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev and other Central Asian leaders, who were born in the USSR in the confines of a multicultural empire, to honour the past and call for brotherly unity (Satpaev, 2015).

Deeply influenced by the pan-Eurasian philosophy of the Russian historian Lev Gumilev and ultranationalist ideologues like Alexander Dugin, Putin also pursued the fervent aspiration to reunite post-Soviet nations into a single civilisational space dominated by the Russian language as the lingua franca (Abbas, 2022; Jukic, 2021). His lofty designs were found embodied in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in replacement of the "Shanghai Five" alliance initially promoted by China (Шанхайская Организация Сотрудничества, ШОС). In a bid to thwart plans from foreign powers to fill the vacuum left by the Soviet Union, the Russian presidency viewed Western efforts to spread ideals of democracy and freedom with growing suspicion (Mearsheimer, 2014).

In the unstable context of the Colour Revolutions in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005), Russia became particularly preoccupied with the eruption of anti-regime riots and mass protest movements since they were interpreted not merely as a vigorous appeal for change but as a direct threat to its own existence (Ambrosio, 2007; Donnacha O Beachain & Abel Polese, 2010). In 2008, Georgia's willingness to step into NATO inflicted a further blow to Putin's intimate conviction that post-Soviet countries had been longing for a triumphant return to the past. Despite a neutral stance towards EU's Neighbourhood Policy in the early 2000s, Moscow also began regarding the EU's intrusion into its "sphere of privileged interest" (Medvedev, 2008), as being likely to pose a major danger in coming years as a growing number of CEECs envisioned their future within the boundaries of the European Union (Light, 2008; Liik, 2018).

It is for such reasons that the Kremlin pinned hopes upon the rapid expansion of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), created in 2011, as a dynamic bridge between Europe and the Asia Pacific region in the evocation of Gorbachev's dream of a "Common European House" (Gorbachev, 1989; Lukyanov, 2014). Indeed, Putin strongly believed that the EEU would act as a powerful catalyst towards a deeper integration of Europe and Central Asia into a common economic bloc similar in form but not in substance to the EU model (Dragneva, 2018). Of all the initiatives for reunification launched during Putin's first term, none was more advanced and central than the transformation in 2002 of the CST into a NATO-styled, properly operational body: the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (Организация Договора о коллективной безопасности, ОДКБ).

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A Return to the Cold War era: The CSTO as a ploy to defend Russian hegemony?

The CSTO had the principal aim to bring Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan together under the flag of Russia within an institutionalised framework for security cooperation and collective defence. Reflecting the structural features of NATO, the CSTO is composed of the Collective Security Council, the Council of Defence Ministers, the Committee of Security Council Secretaries, the CSTO Joint Staff and three other operational and military command branches (Kazsuba, 2017). It is worth recalling here that the first objective of the organisation was to preserve regional peace and stability in an international context following the rise of Islamist terrorism and the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan (Javaid, 2017). At the same time, Russia was fighting a brutal war in Chechnya while facing terrorist acts conducted at home by Chechen separatists.

With the memory of the 2002 attacks still very fresh in the minds of the Muscovite population, there was no question about the resoluteness of the Russian leadership to quell sparks of secessionist rebellion on the pretext of combatting terrorism from all sides (Lynch, 2005; Trenin, 2003). In this sense, the CSTO was instrumental to the joint efforts of Russia and its Central Asian allies against armed insurgency and, more broadly, political terror (Javaid, 2017). By virtue of Article 4 of the CSTO charter, military and peacekeeping assistance had to be provided in the event of an attack against one or more members of the organisation. That the CSTO was to turn into a pivotal instrument of Russia's security strategy doctrine (Стратегия Национальной Безопасности Российской Федерации) was beyond doubt in the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian war (Chirkova, 2012).

At a summit held in Moscow in 2009, CSTO member states accepted the Russian proposal for creating a Collective Rapid Reaction force of 16,000 troops, including 8,000 battle-hardened veterans of the Chechen and Georgian wars from Russia, 4,000 troops from Kazakhstan and the remaining battalions assigned by other member states (Mowchan, 2009). This rapid reaction corps was tasked with combating drug trafficking, neutralizing terrorist threats, deterring potential military aggression and providing rescue support for natural disaster-hit member states. Far from being a purely irrational decision tinted with paranoia and fear, the deployment of the CRRF took place precisely in response to the eastward expansion of NATO in a decade-long process from the 1997 adhesion of Romania and Bulgaria to the 2009 membership of both Balkans countries Albania and Croatia.

The second most logical explanation is that the CSTO sought to reinforce its rapid deployment capabilities in face of transnational Islamist movements gaining ground in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries (Felgenhauer, 2009; Turarbekova, 2022). The fact that the latter states had become increasingly exposed to widespread popular discontent and Islamist militancy also justified the possibility for the CSTO to meddle in their internal affairs. However, this approach did not last long, given that any form of encroachment on national sovereignty was barely tolerated since the end of the Soviet Union. For instance, the CSTO formally refused to intervene in Kyrgyzstan when ethnic clashes broke out in 2010 between Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities (Tynan, 2010).

The refusal by the then Russian president Medvedev and the CSTO Secretary General to interfere was partly motivated by Uzbekistan's protest against taking such a bold initiative. But the reality is that principles of national sovereignty and non-interference had no broad purpose beyond shielding certain authoritarian rulers from international scrutiny for all the human rights violations and crimes committed in the past decades (Balci, 2021; Karimov, 2021). In May 2005, after being accused of having brutally repressed a mass protest in the streets of Andijan, Uzbek president Karimov ordered the expulsion of US troops stationed in Khanabad amidst fears of international sanctions (Gleason, 2006). Similarly, the CSTO took no concrete action against Belarusian president Lukashenko for the harsh repression of thousands of protesters following his re-election in 2006.

In 2012, the return of Putin to the presidency provided a new impetus for the CSTO at the heart of Russia's strategic and foreign policy framework. Aware of the deteriorating geopolitical context resulting from the Arab Spring of 2011, the new Russian president began employing more and more frequently a nationalistic tone in his electoral speeches and his official publications (EU DG for External Policies, 2017). Taking a stance opposite to that of his predecessor, Putin made clear his intention to promote and defend a new international order based upon the sacred principle of non-interference and the firm rejection of Western-promoted norms as the core basis for international law regimes. His staunch criticism of the NATO military intervention in Libya, which resulted in the fall of Ghaddafi in October 2011, reflected his profound aversion to the right of intervention on the basis of humanitarianism or, according to the UN General Assembly, the responsibility to protect (R2P) in the case of Arab revolutions (Gonzales, 2012; Larssen, 2016). Along with other BRIC countries, Russia thus abstained from voting the SC Resolution 1973 of March 2011 in favour of a military operation against the regime of Ghaddafi. In one of his articles, titled "Russia and the Changing World" published in February 2012, Putin outlined most of his main strategic ambitions for the following decade, with the fierce defence of Russia's territorial security and national strategic interests against the penetration of NATO influence in the first place (Putin, 2012). His absolute conception of Russia as being a Great Power (*velikaya derzhava*) reasserting its dominance within the broader family of nations was, according to both Tsentr and Reshetnikov, the fruit of past disillusionments and mounting frustrations with the commanding, rather patronising attitude of the West (Levada Tsentr, 2018; Reshetnikov, 2018).

In the 2014 Security Strategy and the updated Foreign Policy concept, Putin and his allies were adamant about the fact that the Truman-style policy of containment (*sderzhivanyie*) conducted by the United States and the West against Russia had to be countered with a more assertive and less compromising approach (EU DG for External Policies, 2017; Liu, 2022). At the same time, both strategic documents emphasized an even greater necessity for Russia to maintain its pre-eminence and influence in the post-Soviet space. Behind this key strategic objective lies Russia's deep-rooted instinct to protect its border regions with a buffer zone against the likelihood of any external aggression. Unsurprisingly, it has become very important for the Russian leadership to keep cultivating strong and friendly relationships with CSTO member states. In particular, Uzbekistan, which joined the organisation six years earlier, suspended its membership in June 2012.

It was no coincidence that this sudden change of direction in Uzbek foreign policy was grounded in a strategic rapprochement with the United States as symbolised by the reopening of temporary military bases in link to the Taliban threat (Panfilova, 2012). Against all odds, the military relationship with its powerful neighbour remained broadly intact as Uzbekistan continued to get supplied with Russian-made military equipment (Fazendeiro, 2012). In leaving the CSTO regional framework in 2012, Uzbek President Karimov conveyed the unequivocal message that Russia's tutelage over the region was no longer welcomed as positively as in the 1990s. If Uzbekistan's choice to leave the regional alliance was nonetheless seen as the first crack within the regional unity of Central Asia, then Russia's annexation of Crimea was, by far and large, the most serious and contentious event that left the entire organisation profoundly divided on the question of post-Soviet boundaries.

From Russia's Annexation of Crimea to Putin's Invasion of Ukraine: CSTO's Future at Stake

The 2014 annexation of Crimea via an illegal referendum held by pro-Russia separatists opened Pandora's box to the ongoing identity crisis experienced by numerous Russian-speaking ethnic Russians who found themselves torn away from their motherland (*rodina*) after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Goble, 2016; Mankoff, 2022). The particular case of the Crimean Peninsula as the shared homeland for the established Tatar, Ukrainian and Russian communities sheds light on the treatment issue of all these cultural, ethnic and religious minorities that have remained unaddressed ever since (Bretlich, 2015).

Further, in the face of the worsening living conditions and the marginalization of ethnic Russians by freshly independent governments all over the post-Soviet space, Yeltsin's adviser Sergei Karaganov set forth a new policy strategy for the protection and the legal recognition of undocumented Russians as special-status citizens (Pynnoniemi, 2014). What is today commonly known as the Karaganov Doctrine immediately came under a torrent of severe criticisms from several post-Soviet countries, especially Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan which is home to around 3,4 million ethnic Russians. At the time, the Kazakh President expressed his disapproval of such policy doctrine on the grounds that it represented a mere violation of Kazakhstan's territorial integrity and national sovereignty (Brletich, 2015). Two decades later, Crimea's annexation led Kazakhstan to voice even deeper fears and concerns about the risk of facing a similar scenario in northern provinces where Russians are known to represent roughly a third of the local population (Moore, 2017).

As expected, the Crimean crisis and the ensuing tensions between Moscow and its former Soviet satellite states over the fate of ethnic Russians significantly reshaped the character of security relationships amongst CSTO countries. Whilst the Kazakh Minister of Foreign Affairs (MFA) applauded the Crimean referendum as the "free expression of the will of the Autonomous Republic's population" (Sabyrbekov, 2014), Kyrgyz MFA nonetheless expressed some reservations in indicating that Putin's puppet Viktor Yanukovitch lost total legitimacy in the eyes of the Ukrainian population (Ibid, 2014; Joanna, 2014).

In the same vein, the Uzbek foreign affairs minister interpreted Russia's takeover of Crimea as an unacceptable assault on Ukraine's national sovereignty (Bhradrakumar, 2014). Refusing to take a firm stand on the crisis, Turkmenistan eventually abstained from the UN vote on sanction packages against Russia (RadioFreeEurope, 2014). In the case of Tajikistan, which has one of the lowest percentages of ethnic Russians among post-Soviet republics, very few comments had been made regarding the possibility of "a peaceful settlement of the crisis through dialogue and negotiations" (Mukhtorova, 2015).

However, the vagueness of Tajikistan's official line vis-à-vis the Ukrainian crisis contrasted distinctly with the openly anti-Russian rhetoric of several Tajik political personalities, such as Suhrob Sharipov, a prominent figure of the pro-governmental People's Democratic Party (PDP), who once referred to Russia's approach towards Tajikistan as "stupid and double-faced" (Mukhtorova, 2015). Sharipov's explicit words prompted other Tajik major figures to reproach Russia for sowing discord and tension among local populations. For instance, Islamic Renaissance Party's leader Muhiddin Kabiri drew a clear parallel between the Crimean case and ethnic Russian-populated provinces of Central Asia (Ibid).

In March 2015, despite palpable differences of opinion in the ranks of Russia's allies, Stanislav Zas, secretary general of the CSTO, offered to dispatch a peacekeeping force of 4,000 troops to the Donbas region that had been engulfed in a violent conflict over the past year. One month earlier, the conclusion of the Minsk II Agreement, a peace resolution framework set out between Moscow and Kyiv and its Western allies, was supposedly designed to halt the conflict by calling for the withdrawal of forces from both sides and the reintegration of secessionist regions into Ukraine (Grono & Brunson, 2018).

Yet there was no immediate sign of improvement in the aftermath of the agreement as the war seemed to have passed the point of no return. Zas further refuted the claim made by Ukraine that the alliance bloc was nothing more than a powerful instrument of leverage used by Russia to serve its expansionistic ambitions. Instead, he recalled that any military response to the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Ukraine's eastern territories was possible if, and only if, the prior decision to launch it was collectively and carefully weighed by every member state of the organisation (Ruehl, 2022).

In early February 2022, less than eight years since the conflict started, Secretary General Zas renewed his proposal for sending a peace-keeping force to the Donetsk and Luhansk regions but this time it was received with either scepticism or reticence on the part of CSTO countries (TASS, 2022). Although the geopolitical context has undergone tremendous change since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, many CSTO members have held and even consolidated the same strategic positions as before. After Russian president Putin recognised the independence of the two breakaway regions, Kazakh foreign minister Mukhtar Tleuberdi considered any CSTO peacekeeping intervention as "practically impossible" since a UN mandate was required instead.

Although the likelihood of a peace-keeping operation in the Donbas remained extremely low, the CSTO successfully sent a force of 2,500 troops to Kazakhstan in order to secure critical infrastructures that had been put at risk by January's nationwide protests and riots (Kucera, 2022). Restoring peace and order in the streets of Astana was not only the most urgent priority of the Kazakh leadership and the CSTO's Secretary General. More indirectly, Russia understood the Kazakh revolts as the manifest expression of growing exasperation and defiance among local populations against the distant rule of Moscow (Gleason & Dunay, 2022).

In the early morning hours of February 24, 2022, Ukraine was awakened by the sound of Russian artillery guns. Following the pro-Russian separatist republics of Luhansk and Donetsk proclaiming their independence only two days later, Putin launched a full-scale invasion of the country aiming to topple Zelensky's government, which he compared to an illegitimate, Nazi regime and accusing it of committing genocide in Ukraine's Russian-populated territories (Hinton, 2022). As large Ukrainian cities like Kyiv, Kharkiv and Lviv were struck by simultaneous bombings and heavy missile attacks, NATO called an emergency meeting with the chief of staff Jens Stoltenberg who condemned the "demilitarisation and denazification campaign" (NATO, February 24, 2022) initiated by Putin as a "reckless attack" (NATO, February 24, 2022).

While Western powers all unanimously denounced, in Biden's words, "the unprovoked and unjustified attack by Russian military forces" (NATO, 2022), CSTO states reacted differently to the shock of what Lavrov already regarded as "a fratricidal war" between two nations that have been bound together by a commonly shared culture and history (Lavrov, 2014). At a summit meeting of CSTO's heads of state hosted by Russia on May 16, Putin and his close Belarusian ally attempted to gain broader political and military support for the war effort against Ukraine (Gale, 2022).

However, Central Asian leaders neither mentioned the war as a topic of central concern for the organisation itself nor accepted to take part in Russia's "special military operation" (специальная военная операция) (Bhadrakumar, 2022). In summary, the CSTO as a collective defence body provided no assurance that it would intervene in an ongoing conflict that has very little to do with its primary interests. According to Azamat Akeneyev, an economist based in Bishkek, "The CSTO is living its final days. Of its five members, four are at war, two between each other" (Altynbayev, 2022). The gap between the reality and the current discourse on the unbreakable unity amongst post-Soviet republics is even wider when it comes to joint military exercises.

The cancellation by Kyrgyzstan of the 'Inviolable Brotherhood-2022' drills that were initially planned to be held on its territory on October 10-14 is a blatant illustration of how far the CSTO club is agitated by internal rifts further undermining the credibility and the solidity of the military alliance (AP News, 2022). More than 6,500 troops and around 850 units of military equipment and vehicles, including aeroplanes and helicopters, were supposed to join these large-scale exercises. The Kyrgyz decision to withdraw from it took place a few days after Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov refused to attend an informal meeting with other leaders of CIS states (Putz, 2022). The absence of Armenia at a two-week joint exercise last September did not pass unnoticed either, as it was interpreted as a clear message that resentment persisted in Yerevan since the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Roubinski, 2022).

There is no doubt that even today, Armenia harbours strong reservations towards other CSTO members and especially Russia after its repeated requests for military aid had been ignored during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, accusing it of complicity with Azerbaijan and squarely rejected by Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan since they are members of the Organization of Turkic States (Asbarez News, 2022). In reality, both Turkic-speaking nations made no attempt to conceal their sympathies for Azerbaijan in the course of the war and, at the Ashgabat summit in November 2021, even congratulated Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev for his brilliant victory over 'pro-Western' Armenia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, 2021; Trend, 2021). This was all done in total disregard of Article 4 of the CSTO Charter by which they are formally bound to each other in case of aggression (Christoffersen, 2022). Yet on September 12, almost two years after a ceasefire agreement was found, hostilities resumed when Azerbaijani troops began firing with heavy artillery into the border provinces of Syunik and Gegharkunik, located roughly 140 km east of the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The Azerbaijani attack thus resulted in a series of border clashes causing nearly 300 casualties, around two-thirds of which were Armenian (Ilyushina, 2022).

The fragile pillars of the CSTO were further sapped by a short but intense border conflict taking place between two of its members: Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Echoing what occurred in April 2021, the clashes lasted for several days as a result of an exchange of fire between Kyrgyz and Tajik border guards near Batken, in southwestern Kyrgyzstan (Sullivan, 2021). Severe material damages were reported on every side of the border and, in addition to the evacuation of 137,000 people from the war zone, the total number of deaths among the civilian population rose to 94 after both countries presumably attacked each other using heavy weapon systems, such as Grad rockets and Turkish-made Bayraktar drones (Davies, 2022; Sultanalieva, 2022).

The irony of the situation is that both the Kyrgyz defence minister and security council secretary already found themselves in Dushanbe when the dispute broke out. As the war escalated, CSTO's secretary general, Stanilas Zev, called from both sides to lay down arms invoking the principle of non-aggression and mutual help enshrined in Article 6 of the organization chart (Krivosheev, 2021). It was not however until close neighbours Russia and Kazakhstan intervened in favour of peace that a ceasefire was eventually signed by both belligerent parties at a summit of the SCO. The fact that tensions over the delimitation of the border line are still palpable between the two countries may therefore explain why Kyrgyzstan unhesitatingly refused to welcome Tajikistani troops on its territory on the occasion of "Indestructible Brotherhood-2022" exercises (Rickleton, 2022).

Conclusion

As far as the literature seems to indicate, it is quite premature to jump to the conclusion that the CSTO is nearing its end as a result of the competing interests and territorial disputes that have recently intensified amongst its members. However, it is highly plausible that several CSTO states may already be preparing for the aftermath of the war in Ukraine by not excluding more stable and fruitful military alliances with other regional competitors like China and India. For instance, at an important meeting with Chinese Minister of National Defence Wei Fenghe held in April 2022 in Nur-Sultan, Kazakh President Tokayev insisted on the point that both countries have established a solid and comprehensive strategic partnership in the essential domains of peace-keeping operations, joint exercises, personal training and military technologies (Xinhua, 2022). In turn, the Chinese defence minister flattered Tokayev by calling him an old friend of the Chinese people (Ibid). Of further interest is the emerging security cooperation between China and Tajikistan. In exchange for allowing China to use its territory as an outpost of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), Tajikistan has been reportedly supplied with highly advanced Chinese-made equipment, weapons and ammunition. In October 2021, the Tajik government announced that China would establish PLA garrisons in the Gorno-Badakhshan region (Eurasianet, 2022). These latest developments constitute compelling evidence that, in a near future, the CSTO will certainly compete with other equally central military structures steered by regional hegemons.

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