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Post- Soviet NATO, or the Rebirth of the Warsaw Pact?

By Anahit Shirinyan

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On February 4, 2009, the presidents of the seven member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, signed an agreement in Moscow during a session of the Collective Security Council to set up a rapid response force.

In the past the CSTO had such a rapid deployment force consisting of 3,000 troops however, as noted by Russian Federation President Dmitry Medvedev, all this merely existed on paper. The new agreement envisages increasing the number of troops to 10,000. Each of the member states will allocate one battalion to the rapid reaction force. Each nation's battalion will be stationed on its own soil and under its command.

Will Armenian forces fight against the Taliban?

The signing of the agreement has lead analysts to conclude that Moscow wishes to bring the Warsaw Pact back to life and that the new agreement is nothing less than a challenge to Washington and its NATO allies. In particular it was Russian President Medvedev who gave rise to such conclusions when he declared that the force to be created would be combat ready, armed with the latest military technology and on a par with NATO forces in terms of overall military resources.

Medvedev also noted that the CSTO and EurAsEC (Eurasian Economic Community) summits signal new qualitative Russian relations with the member states of these organizations both on a multilateral and bilateral level. According to official information,

The officials at various levels enumerated possible missions such as: deterring and repelling aggression by conventional military forces; defending the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the organization's member countries; conducting "special operations"; and dealing with asymmetrical threats and challenges, including international terrorism, radical Islam, and other forms of "violent extremism," trans-border organized crime and drug trafficking, and even natural or technological disasters.

These challenges, by the way, are mostly hanging over the head of the central Asian republics and their source is to be found in neighboring Afghanistan. As expressed by Sergei Prikhodko, the Russian President's Foreign Policy Advisor, Afghanistan is the primary threat to the organization in terms of security. "The CSTO summit and its decisions are the joint response to those threats arising from its southern borders – the activities of the Taliban, the situation in Afghanistan and, to a large degree, in Palestine," he stated.

Collective disagreement

The signing of the agreement, however, wasn't unanimously accepted by all member states of the organization. Ukraine signed on with certain reservations, agreeing to the deployment of its forces to individual missions rather than on a permanent basis. The agreement led to widespread displeasure in Belarus. The political opposition there charged Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka with violating the country's constitution because it prohibits the deployment of Belarus armed forces outside its state borders.

In addition, the Belarus Constitution notes that the Belarus strives to be a neutral nation. Nevertheless, a spokesperson for the country's ministry of foreign affairs publicly declared that the Belarus army cannot be stationed in post-Soviet hot spots, in conflict zones, given that the country's constitution doesn't allow it.

Perhaps what is noteworthy is that the CSTO member states are either not buoyed by the prospect of the application of collective forces in general or either each of them regards that new mechanisms are more beneficial. In addition, some of the CSTO member states are on friendly terms with one another.

In the estimation of analysts, the new agreement is most beneficial for Russia. As noted by Kremlin advisor Gleb Pavlovsky, the CSTO is of prime significance to Russia "in opposition to Georgia, a vengeful aggressor state that seeks to revise borders". Experts are of the opinion that the most important program in the back of Moscow's mind is to employ CSTO forces as a peacekeeping detachment across the post-Soviet expanse.

Aleksei Maleshenko, a resident scholar at the Moscow office of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, views the new agreement as the latest step by Moscow to strengthen its influence in former Soviet countries. Nevertheless, Mr. Maleshenko doesn't think that the CSTO will begin to play an active role in regional security issues. "I cannot picture the CSTO taking any real action. For example, it will not fight against NATO in Abkhazia or within the borders of Georgia. In the same manner, it will not come to the rescue of any of the presidents in the case of an Islamic-inspired uprising," notes Mr. Maleshenko.

"In a more tangible sense than other CSTO countries, Armenia regards this arrangement as beneficial to itself. Yerevan welcomes the February 4 decision to create a rapid response force in Yerevan's own frame of reference," writes the Eurasia Daily Monitor, alluding to the

Karabakh conflict. “Armenia views the CSTO primarily as a conventional military actor as well as a framework for Russian protection of Armenian territorial gains against Azerbaijan. This traditional view contrasts with that of Central Asian governments, which expect the CSTO to deal with asymmetrical threats and challenges, such as those associated with terrorism, from non-state sources”.

The prime targets of the CSTO, terrorism, Islamic extremism, narco-trafficking, etc, are truly the most vexing problems confronting Central Asia. However, these countries however aren’t all that disposed to deploying their forces in other locations. In addition, conflicts amongst these countries on a host of issues (water resources, ethnic problems) continue till today and securing cooperation amongst them is a complex task indeed.

What is most important, however, is that for Russia the central Asian countries aren’t the most reliable of partners. It was only after Russia agreed to give Kyrgyzstan a financial package of \$300 million in cash (in addition to \$1.7 billion investment and \$180 million in debt relief) to close the American military base at Manas.

In the words of Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev the reason for the move is because the rent being paid by the United States wasn’t sufficient as well as the fact that a negative backlash had taken hold in Kyrgyz society regarding the activities of the American forces.

The Manas military base, established in 2001, plays an important role in the U.S.-led war against terrorism in Afghanistan. The possibility that the Kyrgyz authorities will back down from their ultimatum to close the base if the U.S. agrees to a rent increase, cannot be ruled out.

At the same time, Tajikistan announced on February 6 that it was ready to allow its airspace to be used by non-military NATO aircraft for the transfer of materials to Afghanistan. According to other news in circulation, Uzbekistan still holds out hope of mending fences with the West, particularly the United States. One of the rumors is that Uzbekistan might soon possibly pull out of the CSTO all together as it did once before in 1999.

Due to their natural resources and military strategic position, the nations of Central Asia have found themselves at the center of conflicting interest amongst global geo-political forces. For this reason they are attempting to reap benefits by cooperating with all parties. This factor makes them unreliable partners for Russia.

A scarecrow for NATO

In the opinion of political scientist Sergei Kiselyov, the attempt by the Russian authorities to erect a scarecrow for NATO is perhaps doomed to failure. In Mr. Kiselyov’s view what awaits Russia is the fate of the useless CIS and the never realized Russia-Belarus union state.

In such conditions, when the CSTO has practically no possibility of becoming a political-military alliance on an equal footing with NATO, representing the common interest of the member states, the question arises as to why the need for the “improved” alliance in the first place.

Perhaps, the Russian program to transform the CSTO into a competing military-political alliance vis-à-vis NATO seeks to create an illusion, rather than a reality. Russia will not be

capable of ensuring cooperation amongst the “allies” in emergency situations. Instead, Russia will be able to create conditions where the West will pay it more importance and will more frequently enter into cooperation with it regarding pressing international and regional problems.

It is by no means coincidental that the CSTO confirmed Afghanistan as the prime target for joint action. Medvedyev declared that the CSTO is ready to cooperate with the United States in the war against terrorism in Central Asia. And all this comes at a time when NATO intends to intensify its anti-terrorism operations in Afghanistan.