



Issue Brief

CSTO: Uzbekistan's Dilemma

*Dr. Athar Zafar **

Uzbekistan has suspended its ties with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a regional security grouping. In less than six years this has been the country's second attempt to leave the Russian-led formation. The CSTO is an inter-governmental military and political alliance of the former Soviet republics combining Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and (suspended) Uzbekistan together. The Collective Security Treaty (CST) was signed on 15 May 1992 for a five-year term, with the option of further extensions, amid disturbances in Afghanistan and beginning of the civil war in Tajikistan.¹ In 2002, it was rechristened as the Collective Security Treaty Organization.²

From its inception, the CSTO has been touted as Russia's counterweight to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, since the end of the Cold War while NATO grew in strength and number, the CSTO kept lurching. In comparison to NATO, the CSTO members are plagued by many bilateral differences and their slow economic development made them Moscow-dependent, and unlike NATO, instead of sharing burdens they have been an economic and security liability for Russia. Conversely, its main protagonist Russia too could not come out of the Soviet-era mentality of maintaining relationships with its new neighbours; many analysts suggest that the CSTO has been a sum total of Russia's bilateral agreements with different former Soviet republics, thus hindering its independent evolution as a joint sustainable force.

A comparison of the CSTO with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) would not be out of place here. Despite claiming to be a non-military

organization, the SCO, which was formed about a decade after the signing of the CST, has been successful in charting out its future course and conducting military drills regularly (through Regional Counter-Terrorism Structure, RCTS, platform). In contrast, the CSTO, though being a military organization, failed to formulate a common framework securing the consent of all members or to conduct military drills on regular intervals, thus making the group redundant; at least for some members because those Central Asian Republics (CARs) who are CSTO members are also part of the SCO.³

On the political front as well, the Russian-led organization could not understand and devise proper policy response to counter the Western plans in Afghanistan and Central Asia, and found NATO at its doorsteps. Unlike NATO, the CSTO failed to formulate a security framework acceptable to all its members. Paradoxically, Russia has been offering facilities to NATO through its territory (Ulyanovsk, a city on the banks of the Volga River in Russia has reportedly been proposed as rail and air transport centre for the supply to Afghanistan)⁴ but opposing other former Soviet republics from developing their relationship with the West independently. The disenchantment within the CSTO had been simmering for a long time and Uzbekistan's decision to suspend its ties is simply an outward manifestation.

Uzbekistan's Disenchantment with CSTO

Being one of its founder members, Uzbekistan has been associated with the CSTO since its inception and interestingly the treaty was initially called Tashkent Security Treaty.⁵ In June end, Tashkent sent an official note to the CSTO secretariat in Moscow informing the 'suspension' of its activities with the organization.⁶ While just about a month back Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov was highlighting the importance of the organization during an extraordinary jubilee session of the CSTO and informal meeting of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in Moscow on 15 May⁷, timed to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the signing of the CST and the 10th anniversary of the CSTO. What led Uzbekistan to change its mind and suspend itself from the treaty, and was it unexpected? The decision, indeed, seems strange, particularly in legal terms; the member-nations can leave the grouping but cannot suspend their membership.⁸ It is perplexing to many that Tashkent has decided to leave the group when it was poised to play critical political and strategic roles in

the region in the aftermath of the drawdown of the Western-led forces from Afghanistan by 2014.

The anti-Uzbek riots in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 might be another reason for its disgruntlement with the organization. The CSTO disregarded the requests made by Kyrgyz leaders and remained passive.⁹ It failed to provide security to the ethnic Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, who were the main targets of the violence, leading Uzbekistan to conclude its association with the body. Nevertheless, Tashkent's decision of freezing its ties with the CSTO seems to be the continuation of a process that had begun in 2009 when it refused to ratify the grouping's defence formation – Rapid Reaction Force – and started minimising its engagement. Uzbekistan also did not approve the CSTO's recent agreement restricting members from allowing foreign bases without the concurrence of all member-countries; all indicating the internal dissensions among the treaty members.

Internal Dissensions in CSTO: Causes & Motives

Tashkent's latest manoeuvre highlights the internal weaknesses and tensions in the organization where Moscow could not draw a clear-cut guideline on several security issues. There is a clear trust deficit between its two important players – Russia and Uzbekistan. Moscow has been trying to use the CSTO as a conduit to enforce its hegemony in the post-Soviet space. It wants to maintain its supremacy and restrict regional countries from going out of its sphere of influence. Russia also sees Central Asia as traditional arms market where no other players are allowed to breach its monopoly. While, Tashkent has its own plans, the country wants to emerge as an independent force in the region by enforcing multi-vector policy. Uzbekistan's vacillation between the West and Russia seems to be a part of its efforts towards creating a bipolar Central Asia, where no single power is to have a complete sway over the regional issues.

Uzbekistan's bilateral relations with some CSTO members are also not very healthy. For instance, there is a marked deterioration in Moscow-Tashkent relationship. Both the countries differ on approach to resolve the Afghan issue; while Moscow is in favour of a collective approach, Uzbekistan prefers to address it bilaterally. A reflection of the deteriorating bilateral relationship can be seen in the case of the Russian mobile operator subsidiary in Uzbekistan, Mobile Tele-Systems –

MTS. On the charges of evading taxes, the company's many highest officials based in Tashkent have been arrested,¹⁰ more than 200 of its stations in the country have been closed down on government orders and its license to operate has been suspended without any warning, leaving millions of its subscribers in quandary.¹¹

The Western drawdown from Afghanistan has offered a good chance for the CARs to chart out their priorities with some degree of independence. Uzbekistan is most likely to benefit from the recent developments in Afghanistan. Due to its strategic location it is poised to secure the maximum financial advantages as well as political support from the West. It is a prominent country in the region and has always been seeking a greater role. Tashkent has been reluctant to give much leverage to Russia over the security issues. With a population of more than 28 million people¹² the country regards itself as a Central Asian heavyweight.

Uzbekistan's relationship with its Central Asian neighbours – Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – who are also CSTO members, have not been smooth either. The Tashkent-Bishkek relationship has been marred by boundary disputes, water sharing issues, and the recent anti-Uzbek ethnic riots in southern Kyrgyzstan further widened the distance. On 17 July the border guards of the two countries exchanged fire over the repairing of a road near southern Kyrgyzstan's Jalalabad region bordering Uzbekistan, leading to death and injury on both sides.¹³ The Uzbekistan-Tajikistan relations have ever been bumpy due to boundary and transportation disputes. Besides stopping rail cargo traffic recently, Uzbekistan had halted supply of natural gas to Tajikistan, though it was resumed later. Sharing the water resources is a bone of contention between the landlocked countries, and Uzbekistan has serious concerns about Tajikistan's Rogun Dam project and Kyrgyzstan's Kambarata project, which have been supported by Russia disregarding Tashkent's stances.

Though Uzbekistan has the strongest military in the region, it is most unlikely that by opting out of the CSTO, it would resort to military force to resolve its issues with these two neighbours but it is not surprising that both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan¹⁴ do not favour the latest move of the Uzbekistan president, especially when Kyrgyzstan is poised to take over the rotating presidency of the organization.¹⁵

Uzbekistan's Tryst with the West

The Uzbek decision has not surprised many regional analysts as this has been the second time the country has opted out of the forum. Earlier, it had left the organization in 1999 to cultivate relationship with the West but due to the West's support to coloured revolutions in former Soviet countries and its criticism of Tashkent's violent crackdown on anti-government protesters resulting into the Andijan massacre in 2005¹⁶ once again pushed the country into the Russian fold. After the Andijan incident, the West, including the US, called for political reforms in Uzbekistan,¹⁷ and in return, President Karimov gave the Americans a 180-day ultimatum to vacate the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) air base¹⁸ in the country's southeast, used by them for military operations in Afghanistan.

Presently, the volatile situation in Afghanistan and planned drawdown from the country by 2014 might have led Uzbekistan to recalibrate its policies towards CSTO vis a vis the West. Uzbekistan with a strong presence of Islamists in the country is fearful that an unstable Afghanistan will be detrimental to it. Further, the country wants to pre-empt any Russian move of sending troops under the garb of CSTO to Uzbekistan in case the situation gets disturbed with the drawdown from Afghanistan. On the other hand, Uzbekistan understands well that the West is not going to abandon Kabul despite military drawdown because Washington has signed on 2 May the U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement, which provides a long-term relationship between the two through 2024, and designated Afghanistan on 6 July as a major non-NATO ally.¹⁹ By distancing itself from the CSTO, Uzbekistan it is sending positive signals to the US and NATO that the country is readying for a military alliance with them. Definitely, Tashkent will gain more weight in the region if the West makes its platform available to it.

NATO has been ferrying goods to Afghanistan via the Northern Distribution Network that transits through Uzbekistan due to the uncertainty and safety considerations linked with the Afghanistan-Pakistan Ground Lines of Communication. In view of the imminent withdrawal, NATO has been talking to CARs to allow the reverse transportation of goods and equipment from Afghanistan through their territories. Uzbekistan provides a viable alternative to the Pakistan-Afghanistan route, and in all possibilities Tashkent may allow passage of military equipment through the country's territory. By suspending its membership with the CSTO, Uzbekistan will have a freehand in dealing with this issue.

Reports suggest that NATO is contemplating handing over or selling a number of non-sensitive military equipment to some CARs. Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan might be keen to acquire Western military armament and equipment, which even NATO would be interested in leaving there than carrying them all the way back to their national bases, which makes the used items economically unsustainable. As the West is now favouring ‘carrots’ over ‘sticks’ in its policy towards Uzbekistan, it would like to kill two birds with one stone; the military equipment recipient nation will be obliged to the Western forces and it would be relieved of the packaging and transportation costs of the redundant items. NATO may also consider Uzbekistan for setting up a military base as the country has vast resources to meet the supply of military installations. Tashkent has allowed Germany to use its Termez air base, which is being used for operations in Afghanistan. However, it will be interesting to observe how NATO reacts to Uzbekistan’s moves; as of now it does not seem in a hurry to embrace and make a long-term commitment with a head of the state, who is known for his pragmatism, frequently switching sides between Russia and the West.

Possible Implications of Uzbekistan’s CSTO Suspension

The decision to suspend its relationship with the CSTO is bound to have repercussions in the region. There is no doubt that Uzbekistan’s exit will be considered as a blow to the CSTO, which has been trying to emerge as a cohesive force in the region. After Vladimir Putin’s ascendancy to the presidency a more assertive CSTO was expected but Tashkent’s exit may dent such hopes. It is unlikely that Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan would follow the footsteps of Uzbekistan or try to join any Western-led security formation in the region at the cost of antagonizing Moscow because in comparison to Uzbekistan they are more aligned with Russia, both politically and economically. Nonetheless, the Russian policymakers must be worried that these two countries may pose the threat of abandoning the treaty to get a hard bargain from its prime motivator. Though the two countries have agreed on the outlines of the military base deal²⁰, there were reports that Tajikistan was demanding a tenfold increase in its annual rent for extending the lease to Russia for 49 years beyond 2014.²¹ As a result of estranged relations with Tashkent, both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan may diplomatically follow a reverse route; they may deepen their relations, including military, with Moscow and encourage it to establish additional CSTO bases.

This may result into a chain reaction from Tashkent, which has already opposed the setting up bases in southern Kyrgyzstan near its borders.

Uzbekistan's second attempt to walk out of the CSTO may set three trajectories in the future. First, in case Uzbekistan secedes from the CSTO and comes closer to NATO²², Russia will not only lose its second most powerful country, both militarily and population-wise, to the arch rival organisation of the CSTO but also allow NATO a foothold in its backyard. Second, considering past behaviour, if NATO cold-shoulders Tashkent's manoeuvres, Uzbekistan will be rebounded to the Russian orbit but with much lesser clout and greater say for Moscow; Tashkent will have no choice but to tow the Russian line. Third, Uzbekistan will have to increase its rapport with China, in case both Russia and NATO do not welcome it. Looking at Uzbekistan's manipulative tendencies, the country may repeat the same game of squeezing benefits by putting the players – Russia, NATO and China – against each other. Already, China and Uzbekistan have shown the propensity of coming closer. They have signed many agreements such as the Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership, which are aimed at enhancing bilateral and multilateral cooperation.²³

Conclusion

The CSTO is still undefined about its membership; any country leaves and joins back the organization whenever it wants. Uzbekistan is a good example: it left the organization in 1999 and rejoined in 2006 only to leave again in mid-2012.

For some time, Tashkent was dragging its feet in the CSTO and Moscow must be relieved that now it can have a freehand in formulating future plans. With Uzbekistan on board, building consensus has been an endless exercise for Moscow in the CSTO. Though sans Uzbekistan, Moscow can smoothly formulate the framework for the CSTO engagements but Russia must go back to its drawing boards to find out why the organization has failed to take off despite two decades of existence and whether the fate will be repeated for other Russian-led institutions such as the Customs Union. In order to check any further departures Moscow needs to redefine membership rules. Another question that might be lingering in the Russian political circles, is it an isolated case or beginning of a trend where Beijing is gradually substituting Moscow, at least for CARs!

The suspension can also be seen as Tashkent's intermediary form of action showing Moscow its discontent with the group that has neither become stronger militarily nor enabled the member-countries to give up their acrimonies and develop deeper understanding. Uzbekistan's manoeuvring at this juncture indicates that it wants to gain a few advantages from the West because it is difficult for the country to go out of Russian influence in the region. Uzbekistan also realizes this and wants to play safe; that is why it has not left the treaty completely, only suspended its membership to reactivate if its national interests demand so. The Uzbek leadership has not been quite predictable and it will not be surprising if Uzbekistan once again finds itself as a fulltime member of the treaty.

As far as India is concerned, though it does not directly belong to the CSTO or SCO's security structures, but no country is completely immune from the developments taking place in other country in this small global world.

India, being a close friend of Russia and Uzbekistan, would naturally desire that both the nations enjoy good relationship. Because of its geographical and historical contiguity, any developments in Central Asia have always drawn New Delhi's attention. Along with the CARs, including Uzbekistan, India is concerned about post-2014 Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Western forces. Many analysts are of the belief that the post-drawdown situation in Afghanistan may be similar to the Soviet withdrawal of 1989; plunging the country into internal conflict and civil war. New Delhi is apprehensive about the future developments in Afghanistan and its likely spill over effects in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. In order to bring peace and stability as well as to forestall any negative outcome of the Western withdrawal, India might explore the possibilities of joint cooperation through the CSTO platform collectively and with Uzbekistan bilaterally in the war-torn country. After signing the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline agreement, a stable Afghanistan becomes all the more important for India's energy security, and Central Asian countries can play vital role in this.

** Dr. Athar Zafar, Research Fellow, at Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi 110001*

August 07, 2012

Notes

¹ Collective Security Treaty Organization official website, English page, accessed on 12 July 2012, http://www.odkb.gov.ru/start/index_aengl.htm

² In 2002, the Collective Security Treaty was formally transformed into the Collective Security Organization, “Collective Security Treaty Organization”, accessed on 20 July 2012, <http://www.mfa.am/en/international-organisations/CSTO/>

³ Among Central Asian Republics only Turkmenistan is neither CSTO nor SCO member

⁴ “NATO Head Calls on China, Russia to Help Fund Afghan Forces”, published on 20 April 2012, accessed on 19 July 2012, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/04/19/nato-russia-id|NL6E8FJFUO20120419>

⁵ Fyodor Lukyanov “Uzbekistan Risks Outmanoeuvring Itself”, published on 30 June 2012, accessed on 20 July 2012, <http://rt.com/politics/columns/unpredictable-world-foreign-lukyanov/uzbekistan-us-tashkent-russia/>

⁶ “Uzbekistan Suspends Security Treaty Membership”, published on 28 June 2012, accessed on 13 July 2012, <http://en.rian.ru/world/20120628/174290787.html>

⁷ “President Attends CSTO and CIS Summits”, published on 16 May 2012, accessed on 13 July 2012, <http://uza.uz/en/politics/2706/>

⁸ Fyodor Lukyanov “Uzbekistan Risks Outmanoeuvring Itself”, published on 30 June 2012, accessed on 20 July 2012, <http://rt.com/politics/columns/unpredictable-world-foreign-lukyanov/uzbekistan-us-tashkent-russia/>

⁹ Deirdre Tynan “CSTO Indecisive on Kyrgyzstan Intervention”, published on 14 July 2012, accessed on 20 July 2012, www.eurasianet.org/print/61294

¹⁰ “Uzbekistan: Subsidiary of Russian Mobile Operator MTS Charged with Tax Evasion, its Managers Arrested and Interrogated”, published on 29 June 2012, accessed on 18 July 2012, <http://enews.fergananews.com/news.php?id=2314&mode=snews>

¹¹ “Ezgulik NGO blames Uzbek government for problems at MTS”, published on 21 July 2012, accessed on 24 July 2012, http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=en&sub=&cid=2&nid=20361

¹² Uzbekistan government website accessed on 24 July 2012, <http://www.gov.uz/en/helpinfo/geography>

¹³ “One Dead as Kyrgyz, Uzbek Border Guards Exchange Fire”, published on 17 July 2012, accessed on 20 July 2012, <http://en.ria.ru/world/20120717/174654066.html> and; “Kyrgyzstani, Uzbekistani Border Guards Exchange Fire Across Border”, published on 17 July 2012, accessed on 20 July 2012 http://www.itar-tass.com/en/c32/474841_print.html

¹⁴ Head of the Tajikistan Parliamentary Committee on Defence, Security and Public Order Amirqul Azimov criticized Uzbekistan's move, saying: “Uzbekistan's decision doesn't help collective security in the region,” “Uzbekistan Quits CSTO”, published on 29 June 2012, accessed 12 July 2012, <http://www.news.tj/en/news/uzbekistan-quits-csto>

¹⁵ “Kyrgyz MP Regards Suspension of Uzbekistan's CSTO membership as signal to Reform”, published on 30 June 2012, accessed on 12 July 2012, <http://www.timesca.com/index.php/m-news-by-category/politics-analyses-and-opinions/7739-kyrgyz-mp-regards-suspension-of-uzbekistans-csto-membership-as-signal-to-reform>

¹⁶ On 13 May 2005 troops opened fire on a public demonstration in Andijan. Hundreds reportedly killed and many of the survivors fled the country, “How the Andijan Killing Unfolded”, published on 17 May 2005, accessed on 6 July 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p007hcbm> The exact death figure was not known, the government claimed that 187 people lost their lives but human rights group estimate that more than 1000 people were killed and many more disappeared or went missing.

¹⁷ In a statement over the massacre in Andijan and human rights situation in the country, the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice demanded independent investigation and political reforms in Uzbekistan. She said: “We have been encouraging the Karimov government to make reforms, to make the system more open, to make it possible for people to have a political life.” UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said: “I am extremely concerned by reports that Uzbek troops opened fire on demonstrators in Andijan. I totally condemn these actions and I urge the Uzbek authorities to show restraint in dealing with the situation and look for a way to resolve it

peacefully.” “700’ Dead in Uzbek Violence”, published on 16 May 2005, accessed on 13 July 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/may/16/markoliver>

¹⁸ The base was under American use since 2001 providing logistic and military assistance to NATO forces in Afghanistan. The Bush administration vacated the base in November 2005.

¹⁹ Robert O. Blake, US Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs, speaking at Washington DC on “Central Asia's Role in the Future of Afghanistan”, published on 12 July 2012, accessed on 24 July 2012, <http://uzbekistan.usembassy.gov/tro71612.html>

²⁰ “Russia, Tajikistan strike outline deal on military base” published on 17 July 2012, accessed on 21 July 2012,

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/17/us-tajikistan-russia-base-idUSBRE86GoOJ20120717>

²¹ Alexander Golts “The Collapsing CSTO” published on 17 July 2012, accessed on 26 July 2012, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/the-collapsing-csto/462183.html>.

²² Uzbekistan is already a partner of NATO’s Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), accessed on 25 July 2012, <http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-68oDBC91-B3338661/natolive/51288.htm>

²³ “Uzbekistan, China Sign Joint Declaration on strategic Partnership”, published on 6 June 2012, accessed on 13 July 2012, <http://uza.uz/en/politics/2769/>